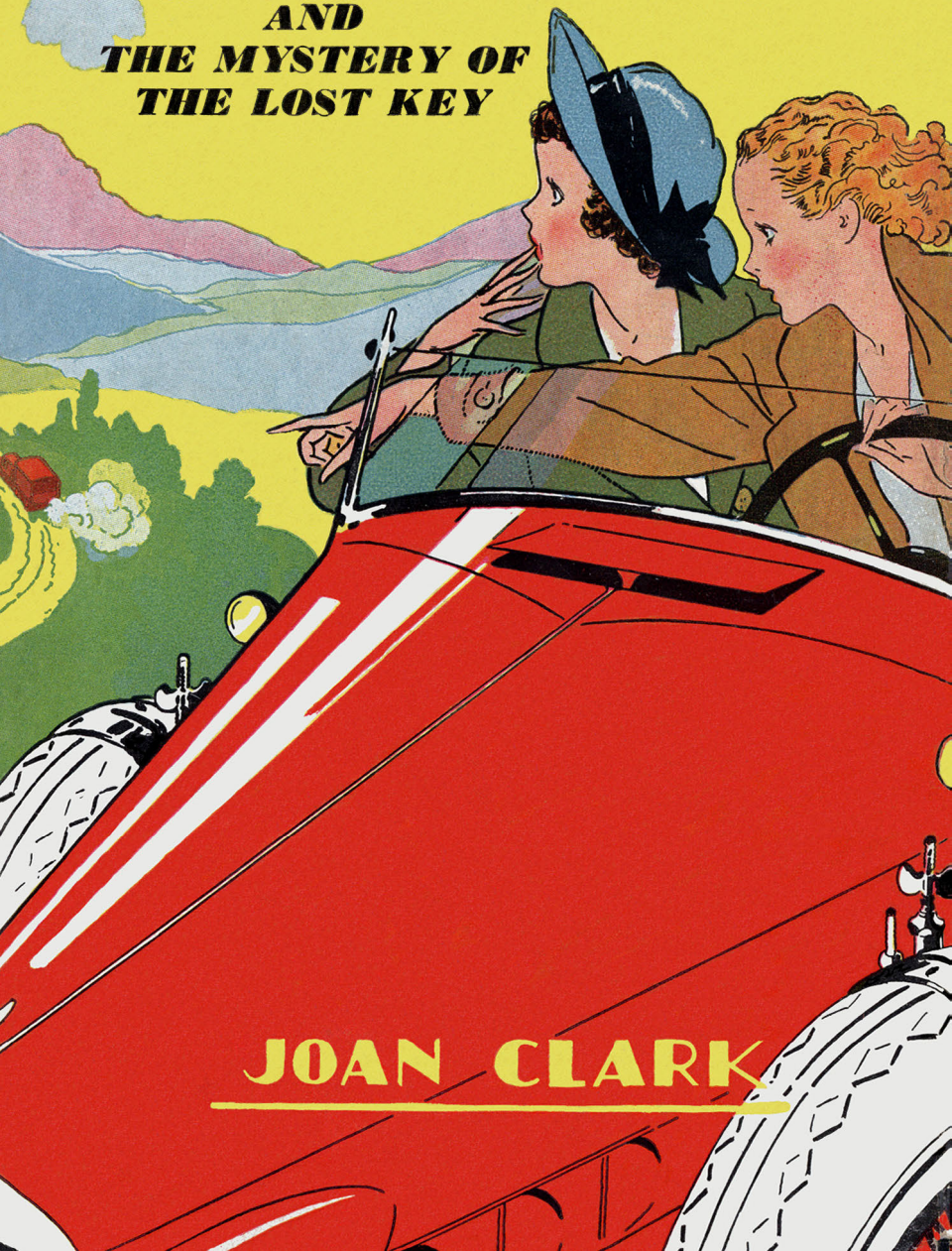
PENNY NICHOLS

AND THE MYSTERY OF THE LOST KEY



JOAN CLARK

Penny Nichols and the Mystery of the Lost Key

By Joan Clark

The beautiful Penny Nichols, whose irrepressible love for sleuthing, involves her in the pursuit of a famous lost inheritance. Among her many exciting adventures is an eerie experience in an old haunted house. Here she obtains the clue to the real jewel thief. The pursuit and capture of the culprit will linger in your memory.

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PENNY NICHOLS AND THE MYSTERY OF THE LOST KEY

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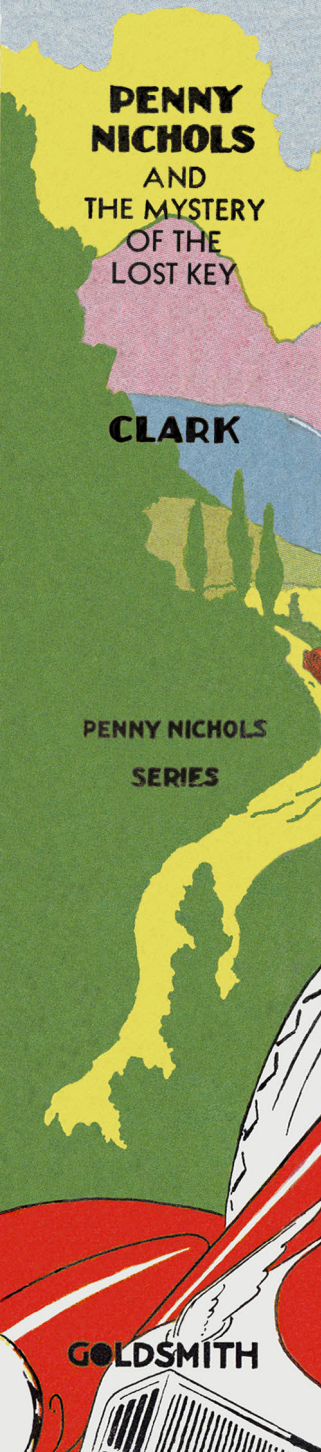

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AND THE
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By

Joan Clark

★

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The Mystery of the Lost Key

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CHAPTER I

A Valuable Letter

"HURRY, Susan! We have only ten minutes before the store closes!"

Penelope Nichols, the slender girl in blue, urged her companion into the revolving doors at the entrance of the Bresham Department Store. A vigorous push sent the barriers spinning at such a rate that other shoppers turned to stare at the two girls.

"You nearly took off my heels that time, Penny," Susan Altman protested with a laugh as they emerged into the crowded store.

"Sorry, but we've no time to waste if I get that pair of white earrings. The clerks are starting to put things away already."

Threading their way through the outgoing stream of shoppers, the girls went directly to the

jewelry counter. Penny peered anxiously into one of the glass cases to see if the coveted ivory ornaments were still on display. They had not been sold.

"Do you think they'll look all right with my red party frock?" she asked her chum as they stood impatiently waiting for a clerk. In matters of dress she valued Susan's opinion more highly than her own.

"Stunning. With your coloring you can wear anything. Now if you had a skin like mine and a snub nose—"

Penny did not hear the remainder of her chum's oft-repeated complaint for she was trying vainly to attract the attention of a clerk. The only available girl at the counter was occupied in showing a tray of fine rings to a tall man in gray tweeds.

"We'll never be waited on," Penny murmured in annoyance. "You can tell it's going to take until closing time before he makes up his mind which ring he wants."

Susan turned to survey the customer. He was expensively dressed and upon a casual inspec-

tion appeared to be a gentleman of considerable means. Although the clerk offered several diamond rings for his approval none of them satisfied him.

"Haven't you anything better than this?" he questioned. "Show me that large diamond, please." He tapped the glass case lightly with his cane.

The clerk obligingly placed the ring before him. The man examined the diamond closely, comparing it with another ring previously shown him. For the first time he appeared aware of Penny and Susan.

"Wait on these young ladies while I make up my mind which ring I prefer," he urged the clerk. "I am in no hurry and I can see that they are."

The clerk hesitated. The rings in which the customer was interested were valuable ones. It was a rule of the store to keep them always in the locked case. Yet it would take her only a minute to wait upon the girls, and obviously the man was a gentleman. She turned to serve Penny.

"I'll take that pair of earrings," Penny announced, indicating the ivory pieces. "They're three dollars, aren't they?"

"Yes, that is correct. I'll have them wrapped for you."

Penny offered the girl a five dollar bill in payment. She could not restrain a little sigh as she saw it deposited in the store's cash drawer. Perhaps she had been foolish to buy the earrings. It meant that she must do without a great many little things in order to keep within her allowance. Penny sighed again. At times it was trying to have a father who believed in maintaining his daughter strictly upon a budget plan.

Her eyes roved aimlessly toward the man at the ring counter. She saw him cast a quick glance about. Then he walked rapidly away, making for the nearest exit.

Penny's keen blue eyes riveted upon the ring tray. The large diamond was missing.

She had not seen the customer actually take it—his movements had been too deft for that—yet she knew for a certainty that while the

clerk's back had been turned he had secreted it somewhere upon his person.

Penny did not hesitate. She darted after him.

"Stop!" she cried. And then to the surprised shoppers who turned at the sound of her voice: "Don't let that thief get away!"

The man wheeled sharply, his face convulsed in anger. With his cane he struck viciously at a stout woman who clutched him by the coat.

A store detective blocked the main exit.

Recognizing that he could not hope to escape that way, the thief turned and bolted up a moving escalator which was carrying a capacity load of passengers to the second floor.

Penny, the detective, and a few of the more energetic customers took up the pursuit.

In a desperate attempt to escape, the thief elbowed women roughly aside as he darted up the stairway. Upon the uncertain footing of the moving treads, several stumbled and fell. In an instant hysterical women were screaming and clutching at one another for support.

A slender girl in a shabby business suit was rudely jostled. Penny, half way up the moving

stairway, tried to save her from a hard fall. She was not quick enough. Down the girl went, and as she fell, the contents of her pocketbook spilled out upon the moving stairway. The thief took advantage of the resulting confusion to melt into the throng of shoppers at the top of the escalator. While store detectives carried on the pursuit, Penny tried to help the terrified women to alight from the stairway.

"Are you hurt?" she asked the girl who had fallen, trying to assist her to her feet.

"Never mind me! Save my pocketbook!" the other cried, frantically beginning to gather up the scattered objects.

The other passengers upon the stairway were more of a hindrance than a help. Yet by working fast Penny managed to accumulate nearly all of the lost articles before the brief ride approached its end.

"My letter!"

At the other girl's shrill cry, Penny saw a white envelope riding serenely on the uppermost step. With a bound she covered the distance which separated her from it, pouncing

upon the letter an instant before the moving belt disappeared into the flooring.

Clutching it triumphantly in her hand, she turned to assist the girl who had lost it.

"Why, you're limping," she observed. "Here, lean on me."

"It's nothing," the girl maintained staunchly. "I twisted my ankle when I fell."

Penny helped her to a nearby chair. Despite the girl's brave words, her lips quivered when she spoke and her attractive face had taken on an ashen hue. Yet, strangely, her interest centered not in her injury but in the letter which she had nearly lost.

"Thank you for saving it," she told Penny gratefully. "I don't know what I should have done if I'd lost that letter. It means everything to me."

Penny stared at the envelope a trifle curiously but she was too well bred to ask personal questions. Before she could make any response store officials hurried up to take charge of the situation. The girl's name was Rosanna Winters, Penny learned, by listening. She lived at a

rooming house on Sixty-fifth Street, not a great distance from Penny's own home.

Rosanna firmly turned down the suggestion of store officials that she be sent to a nearby hospital for first-aid treatment.

"It isn't necessary. I merely twisted my ankle. I'll soon be able to walk on it."

"Let me take you home," Penny offered. "My roadster is parked just outside the store. We live close to each other."

The girl hesitated, then smiled as she said: "That's very kind of you, I'm sure. You don't really mind?"

"Of course not. Here, let me help you downstairs."

"Not by way of the escalator," Rosanna said hastily. "Hereafter I'll ride on the elevator. It's safer."

Although the store's gong had announced the closing hour some minutes previously, shoppers were slow to leave the building. As the girls returned to the street floor they were embarrassed to find themselves the target for many curious stares. Penny readily was recognized

as the girl who had observed the theft of the ring.

"What became of that man who knocked me down?" Rosanna questioned. "I suppose he escaped."

"I'm afraid so," Penny admitted, looking about for Susan. "The last I saw of him he was running toward the kitchenware department with the store detective after him."

Sighting Susan near the outside door, Penny steered her new friend in that direction. Quickly she introduced the girls, mentioning Rosanna's unfortunate accident.

"I saw it all," Susan declared. "Penny, you certainly did stir up things when you set the store detective on that thief."

"And the worst of it was that he escaped," Penny acknowledged. "Of course, he may be caught here in the building but I doubt it."

In the excitement, she had completely forgotten her package at the jewelry counter. The girls would have left the store without it had not the clerk come running after them with the purchase.

"Thank you so much for calling out the alarm," she told Penny gratefully. "If the thief isn't caught I may lose my job."

"Oh, I hope not."

"So do I, but I shouldn't have broken a store rule. I was completely taken in by the man's appearance."

"I don't wonder at that," Penny said. "He certainly looked anything but a crook. Was the ring a valuable one?"

"It was priced to sell at eight hundred dollars. I don't see how I could have been so stupid."

Penny felt sorry for the salesgirl, particularly so when the floorwalker came up and began to question her sharply.

"It really wasn't the clerk's fault," Penny insisted. "I feel certain that man was a professional jewel thief."

"Did you notice his appearance?" the floorwalker asked.

"Yes, he was dressed in a gray tweed suit. I'd say he was approximately six feet in height, dark hair and eyes. His face was long and angular."

The store official noted down the description and took Penny's address in case she might be needed later on to identify the crook if he were captured.

"We're watching all the lower floor exits," the floorwalker informed, "but the chances are the man got away by means of one of the fire escapes."

The store rapidly was clearing of shoppers. Penny and her companions lingered a few minutes longer and then they too were politely requested to leave.

"I'd like to know if the store detective caught that man," Penny declared as they paused for an instant on the street. "I suppose now we'll have to find out by reading our newspapers."

Rosanna Winters turned as if to leave the girls.

"Thank you again for saving my pocketbook," she said to Penny. "My ankle is much better now so I'll just take a streetcar home."

Penny caught her by the elbow.

"You'll do no such thing. Why, I can see that it hurts you every step you take. It isn't

more than a block or two out of my way to drive you home."

Despite Rosanna's protests, she urged the girl into the roadster which was parked at the curbing. Penny was very proud of her car. Although it was not a new model it ran very well and she spent most of her spare time keeping it washed and polished.

Since the Altman residence was close by, Penny dropped her chum off before taking Rosanna home. During the ride to Sixty-fifth Street, the Winters girl spoke scarcely a word. Several times Penny cast a curious glance in her direction.

Rosanna was the quiet type, she decided. A striking brunette with a thoughtful, almost sad face.

"I live at the next house," the girl said as they turned a corner. "The one on the right."

It was a modest but not unattractive boarding house. The porch was clean and the yard more orderly than the majority in the neighborhood.

"I'm only staying here a few days until I can

find another place," Rosanna mentioned, feeling that some explanation was due her companion.

"You are a stranger in Belton City?" Penny guessed.

"Yes, I came here looking for work. But now that won't be necessary." Rosanna hesitated, and then, because Penny had seemed so very friendly, decided to offer additional information. "I am an orphan, Miss Nichols. Until this week I had begun to think that fortune had turned against me."

"And now you've had a piece of good luck?"

"Yes," Rosanna's face glowed as she opened her purse and took out the letter which Penny had picked up from the escalator. "If you hadn't saved this for me, I should have lost everything."

"Then I'm glad I snatched it up in time," Penny smiled.

She could not imagine the contents of the mysterious letter. It was all she could do to keep from asking questions.

"I'd like to have you read it if you care to,"

Rosanna said a trifle timidly. "I'm anxious to learn the opinion of another person."

"Why, I'll be glad to look at it if you wish," Penny returned, a little surprised at the request. "And as far as advice is concerned, I love to offer it."

She accepted the envelope which Rosanna proffered. As she took out the folded letter a key dropped out into her lap.

"What's this?" Penny demanded.

Rosanna laughed nervously. "If what the letter says is true, it seems to be the key to my inheritance! But read the letter for yourself."

CHAPTER II

A Mysterious Key

UNFOLDING the paper, Penny noticed that the message had been written under the letterhead: "J. C. Elfhedge, attorney, Brookport." The communication stated briefly that Rosanna Winters was the sole heiress of the late Jacob Winters, her uncle, and that she had inherited his mountainside estate at Raven Ridge. A key to the property was enclosed. She was urged to inspect the estate at her earliest convenience.

"Well, what do you think of it?" Rosanna questioned as Penny studied the letter in silence.

"Why, it's fine," Penny returned after a slight hesitation. "Did you know Jacob Winters well?"

"I didn't know him at all. In fact I never even met him."

"Oh! Then the inheritance must have come as a surprise."

"It did. Even now I can't help thinking there must be some mistake. Did you ever hear of Raven Ridge?"

"Yes, indeed," Penny told her. "It is a lovely spot near Snow Mountain."

"I must go there as soon as I can," Rosanna said. "Will the car fare be very much do you think?"

"Probably not more than ten dollars."

"That's a large sum for me," Rosanna smiled ruefully. "Of course, now that I've actually inherited Uncle Jacob's estate, I suppose I shouldn't worry about money."

"Well, I shouldn't spend lavishly until I was certain there would be no slip-up about getting the property," Penny advised bluntly. "Perhaps I shouldn't say it, but there's a certain tone to this letter that I don't like."

"What do you mean?" Rosanna questioned.

Penny found it difficult to explain.

"Brookport is only a few miles from here and yet I've never heard of a lawyer by the name of Elfhedge. It seems a trifle strange too that he should enclose a key to the property."

"It struck me that way too at first," Rosanna admitted unwillingly. "Of course, I do have an uncle named Jacob Winters—my mother often spoke of him. He was always considered queer."

"It may be all right. No doubt you have inherited a fortune. Only I think I'd be a trifle cautious until I was certain it wasn't a hoax."

"But what can I do except to obey the letter and visit the property?"

Penny glanced again at the letterhead. "Why not visit this lawyer and have a talk with him? Brookport isn't far from here and it might save you a trip to Raven Ridge."

"Can I reach Brookport by train or bus?"

"I'm afraid not," Penny said. "It's off the main line of travel. You haven't a car of your own or one you could borrow?"

"No."

"I'll take you to Brookport if you like," Penny offered generously. "We might go tomorrow."

"Oh, I shouldn't like to trouble you, Miss Nichols. I can probably rent a car."

"There's no need of it for I would enjoy the ride. Besides, I am curious to learn if there is an attorney by the name of Elfhedge living in Brookport. Suppose I call here for you around ten o'clock tomorrow morning."

"All right," Rosanna smiled. "It's good of you to offer. Perhaps I can repay you someday."

The girls parted, Penny driving directly to her own home. Entering the house by the back door she found Mrs. Gallup, the housekeeper, cooking dinner. The kitchen was permeated with the delightful aroma of frying chicken.

"Is Dad home yet?" Penny inquired, pausing to sniff the air.

"He's in the study," the housekeeper informed.

Penny found Christopher Nichols occupied at his desk. Sometimes it was difficult for her to realize that she was the daughter of a detective who had gained state-wide recognition for his ability in solving baffling cases. Mr. Nichols had served an apprenticeship on the police force, had risen from the ranks, and later had

started his own private detective agency. Yet, despite his success, he was quiet and unaffected.

Mr. Nichols had no real hobbies and only two absorbing interests in life—his work and his daughter. Penny had been left motherless at an early age. Because there had been only a slight feminine influence in her life her outlook upon the world was somewhat different from that of the average high school girl. She thought clearly and frankly spoke her mind. Yet if she enjoyed an unusual amount of freedom for one so young, she never abused the trust which her father placed in her.

Penny loved adventure. Recently, somewhat to her father's chagrin, she had involved herself with a daring gang of automobile thieves. The story of her exciting encounter with underworld characters has been recounted in the first volume of the series, entitled, "Penny Nichols Finds A Clue."

"Now what?" Mr. Nichols demanded gruffly as his daughter perched herself on the corner of his desk. "Has that car of yours broken down again?"

Penny laughed as she shook her head.

"No, believe it or not, I still have a few dollars of my allowance left. I'm after information this time."

"What sort of information?"

"Preferably accurate," Penny smiled. "Tell me, did you ever hear of a lawyer by the name of Elfhedge with an office at Brookport?"

"No, I never did," Mr. Nichols returned instantly. "There is an attorney in the Stover building by the name of Hedgel. Perhaps you're mixed up."

"I have the name right," Penny insisted. She then related the contents of Rosanna Winters' letter.

"It sounds like someone's idea of a practical joke," Mr. Nichols declared. "I'd advise the girl not to spend any money until she's done a little investigating."

"That's what I did tell her."

"I'll look this man Elfhedge up in a day or two if you like," Mr. Nichols promised. "It sounds like a fictitious name to me but of course the letter may be *bona fide*."

Mrs. Gallup interrupted the discussion to announce that dinner was ready. Immediately after the meal had been served, Mr. Nichols left for his office and Penny saw him no more that evening. He left the house before she was up the next morning so she had no opportunity to explain that she was driving Rosanna Winters to Brookport that day.

At ten o'clock she rang the doorbell of the rooming house on Sixty-fifth Street. Rosanna already was waiting.

"I thought you might have changed your mind about wishing to make the trip," she declared, following Penny to the car.

"No, I'm more curious than ever to talk with your lawyer. It will be wonderful, Rosanna, if the estate turns out to be a valuable one."

Rosanna smiled a trifle ruefully. "Yes, I will have plenty of use for the money. I can't believe yet that Uncle Jacob left everything to me."

Penny refrained from saying anything which might disturb Rosanna. Actually, she had not the slightest reason for doubting that the girl

had come into an inheritance, save that the letter from Mr. Elfhedge did not have a genuine tone. It occurred to her that a scheme might be under way to induce the orphan to part with her own savings.

During the ride to Brookport, Rosanna mentioned a few of the hard experiences she had undergone in the past year. First her mother had died, then an aunt with whom she made her home, likewise had been taken from her. She found work of a sort in a grocery store, but long hours and trying conditions had worn her down. She had taken sick. Hospital bills claimed the greater part of the money which her mother had left her. She could not secure her old job back, nor could she find a new one. In desperation she had decided to come to Belton City, hoping that she might secure a position there.

"You can imagine that I was pretty well discouraged when the letter arrived from Mr. Elfhedge," Rosanna ended. "You don't know what a fright you gave me by suggesting that it might be a hoax."

"I'm sorry if I caused you worry. I had no

reason for thinking that someone wrote the letter for a joke."

"Uncle Jacob was noted for doing queer things," Rosanna informed. "I never met him but Mother often mentioned his name. He was quite a traveler, I believe, and collecting was his hobby."

"What did he collect?"

"Oh, things from the Orient and antiques from all over the world."

"Then if you've come into his property, you may have inherited some real treasures," Penny commented. "It would be fun to visit that house at Raven Ridge."

"Yes, but I dread going there alone. Penny, I wish you could go with me."

"I wish I could too, but I guess I'll have to stay at Belton City this summer."

It was only a little after eleven o'clock when the girls reached Brookport. The town was less than a hundred thousand population and Penny had no trouble in finding the main business section. After cruising about for some minutes, they located the street where Mr. Elf-

hedge had his office. The number which they sought brought them to an imposing seven-story brick building.

Penny parked the roadster and they went inside, searching the directory for Mr. Elfhedge's name. It was not listed.

"That's odd," Rosanna remarked with a troubled frown. "His office must be here somewhere in the building."

Penny went over to make inquiry of the elevator boy.

"There's no one in this building by that name," he insisted.

Thinking that the boy might be misinformed, Penny and Rosanna sought the building superintendent. To satisfy them, the man looked carefully through his list of tenants. No one by the name of Elfhedge occupied an office in the building.

"There is an attorney in Room 309 but his name is Rogers," the superintendent told the girls. "You might talk with him. He may know this man Elfhedge."

They went up to Room 309 and after a brief

wait were ushered into the lawyer's private office. Rosanna was too shy to state the purpose of her visit, so Penny explained why they had come. The lawyer had never heard of a colleague by the name of Elfhedge.

"He's never been in this building and I doubt that he's even located in the city," they were told. "You must have made a mistake in the address."

The girls had made no mistake, that they knew. The address was plainly written on the outside of the envelope which Rosanna had in her purse. She showed it to the lawyer.

"Yes, that seems to be this building," he admitted. "It looks as if someone used a fake address."

They left the office completely discouraged. Penny felt sorry for her companion. Rosanna had counted so heavily upon the inheritance. Now it appeared that someone had played a cruel joke upon her.

"You were right," Rosanna acknowledged as they walked slowly back to the car. "You were suspicious of that letter from the first."

"It struck me as peculiar that it was written in longhand instead of on a typewriter," Penny explained.

"I suppose it is nothing but a joke," Rosanna acknowledged, "and yet why should a key be enclosed in the letter?"

"It's beyond me, Rosanna. Even if the trip is wasted, you might feel better about it if you went to Raven Ridge and investigated."

"I'd go in an instant if I had the money to spare."

"I'll loan it to you."

Rosanna shook her head.

"No, I can't take it although it's kind of you to offer."

"I wish I could help you, Rosanna."

"You've helped me a great deal already. Perhaps a little later on I'll find some way of getting to Raven Ridge."

Penny tried to urge the loan, but Rosanna, who was unusually proud, would not hear of it. The girls parted at the latter's boarding house on Sixty-fifth Street.

"I'll see you within a day or two," Penny

promised as she drove away. "Perhaps by that time Father will learn something about Mr. Elfhedge."

She did not really believe that Mr. Nichols could find anything to report. Doubtless, the name had been a fictitious one. Yet who had played the joke upon Rosanna and for what purpose?

"There's more to the affair than what appears on the surface," she reflected. "If only I had the chance, I'd do a little investigating."

Penny smiled at the thought, little dreaming that such an opportunity was to present itself very shortly.

CHAPTER III

An Arrogant Guest

THAT evening at the dinner table Penny told her father about the unsuccessful trip to Brookport.

"It looks like someone played a practical joke on your friend," he commented.

"But who could be so mean, Dad? Rosanna has had such a desperately hard time to get along. Now if she wastes money going to Raven Ridge on a fruitless visit, it won't seem fair."

"Well, it's likely to amount to just that," Mr. Nichols returned. "I tried to locate that attorney, Elfhedge today."

"Any luck?"

"No, I doubt if such a person exists."

"So do I," Penny agreed. "By the way, what became of the newspaper today? I wanted to read up about the department store theft."

"To see if your name was mentioned?" her father teased.

"No, I was just curious to learn if the thief was captured."

"I can set your mind at rest on that point," Mr. Nichols informed. "He wasn't. If you're interested in the details, you'll find the paper on the front porch."

Penny helped Mrs. Gallup clear the table of dishes, then went outside to get the paper. The story appeared on the front page. It was a slightly distorted version of what had happened and Penny was just as well pleased that her name was not mentioned. According to the account, the thief had escaped by means of a rear fire escape. The ring, valued at approximately nine hundred dollars, was fully covered by insurance.

While Penny was reading the story, Mr. Nichols came out and sat on the porch steps.

"How would you like to take a little trip?" he asked casually.

Penny dropped the newspaper. "With you?" she questioned eagerly.

"Yes, I've been working hard lately and I feel like taking a rest over the week end."

"Where will we go?"

"I thought of Mt. Ashland. It will be cool in the mountains and at this time of year the hotels will not be too crowded."

"Why, Mt. Ashland isn't very far from Snow Mountain, is it?" Penny demanded with interest. "I'm going to look it up on the map."

She ran into the house for the big red atlas. A moment later she returned, her eyes dancing with excitement.

"Mt. Ashland isn't more than a two hours' drive from Snow Mountain," she told her father.

"And just what difference does it make?"

"Why, Raven Ridge is located on Snow Mountain, you know."

"Oh! So that's what you have in your mind!"

Penny perched herself on her father's knee, smiling her most beguiling smile.

"Never mind, you little tease," he said hastily. "I give in."

"You don't even know what I want," she laughed.

"Yes, I do. You want to take this new friend of yours along with us."

"I think it would be nice, don't you?" Penny beamed. "Then while you're having a good rest at Mt. Ashland we could drive on to Raven Ridge. Rosanna could investigate her property there, if she has any, and it wouldn't cost her much of anything to make the trip."

"You seem to have it well planned," the detective marveled.

"Well, what's wrong with the idea?"

"Nothing. We'll take her along if she wants to go. She may help keep you out of mischief."

"When do we start?" Penny demanded gaily.

"Tomorrow afternoon as soon as I can get away from the office."

"Then I'll dash over to see Rosanna now and ask if she can go with us," Penny announced.

Without giving her father an opportunity to change his mind, she hurried to the garage for her roadster. At the rooming house on Sixty-fifth Street, the landlady, a stout woman with a tired, lined face, admitted her.

"Miss Winters has the attic room," she informed. "Five flights up."

At the top of the last flight Penny paused to

catch her breath before rapping on Rosanna's door. The orphan was a trifle startled at seeing her.

"Do come in," she said cordially.

The room was oppressive and warm, although the tiny windows were open wide. A bed, a chest of drawers, two chairs and a cracked mirror composed the entire furniture.

"I don't expect to stay here long," Rosanna said apologetically. "I thought it would do until I found work."

"Why, of course," Penny agreed instantly. "Did you have any luck today?"

Rosanna shook her head and sank wearily down upon the bed.

"No, everywhere I went it was the same old story. I'm beginning to think I'll never find employment."

"Perhaps you'll not need it if you come into an inheritance," Penny smiled. "Rosanna, I've found a way for you to get to Raven Ridge."

The orphan's face brightened but for a full minute after Penny had explained the plan, she sat silent.

"Don't you want to go?" Penny asked, perplexed.

"Yes, of course I do. It isn't that. You've been so good and kind to me. I'll never be able to repay you for your trouble and expense."

"Nonsense! The trip will be more fun if you go along, Rosanna. Besides, I have an overwhelming curiosity to see Raven Ridge and your uncle's estate. Please say you'll go."

"All right, I will," Rosanna gave in.

"Good. Father and I will stop for you tomorrow. I must get back home now and start packing."

Penny clattered down the creaking, narrow stairway and disappeared into the night.

Although the trip was only a short one, and at the longest would occupy less than a week's time, Penny spent many hours planning her wardrobe. She packed an evening gown, several afternoon frocks, and sports clothes. Then, reflecting that Rosanna would not be so well fixed, she hung the garments back in the closet, substituting her plainest dresses.

"There, that will be much better," she

decided. "A wise traveler goes light anyway."

At three o'clock the following afternoon, Penny and her father stopped at Rosanna's rooming house to pick up the orphan. She was waiting on the porch, and as Penny had thought, confined her luggage to one overnight bag.

At first the road to Mt. Ashland wound through fertile valleys and low hills. Gradually, they climbed. The curves became more frequent. Tall pines bordered the roadside.

Six o'clock found the party well into the mountains, although still some miles from their destination. Noticing a pleasant little inn at the top of a ridge, they stopped for dinner which was served on the veranda overlooking a beautiful valley.

"I wonder if Raven Ridge will be as pretty as this?" Rosanna mused.

"It's even more beautiful," Mr. Nichols told her. "The scenery is very impressive."

Before they arose from the table it was growing dusk for they had lingered to watch the sunset.

"It's just as well that I wired ahead for hotel

reservations," Mr. Nichols remarked as they hurried to the parked car. "Getting in after dark it wouldn't be so pleasant to find all the rooms taken."

At exactly nine o'clock the twinkling lights of the Mt. Ashland Hotel were sighted, and a few minutes later the automobile drew up in front of the large white rambling building. An attendant took the car and they all went inside.

"I doubt if you'll get rooms here tonight, sir," a bellboy told the detective as he carried the luggage to the main desk. "There's been a big rush of guests this week-end."

Mr. Nichols was not disturbed. At the desk he merely gave the clerk his name, claiming the two rooms which he had reserved by wire.

"We saved two very fine rooms for you," the clerk returned politely. "Both overlook the valley."

While Mr. Nichols signed the register, Penny and Rosanna sat down nearby. Their attention was drawn to the main entrance. A large touring car had pulled up to the door. A pompous looking woman of middle age and a younger

woman, evidently her daughter, had alighted. Both were elegantly if somewhat conspicuously dressed. Several suitcases, hat boxes and miscellaneous packages were unloaded. The older woman carried a fat lapdog in her arms.

"They seem to have brought everything but the bird cage," Penny said in an undertone.

The two women walked up to the desk.

"I am Mrs. Everett Leeds," the one with the dog announced a trifle too loudly. "I have a reservation."

"Just a minute please," the clerk requested.

It seemed to Penny that he looked disturbed as he thumbed through his cards.

"There is no occasion for delay," Mrs. Leeds declared blandly. "My daughter and I always engage the same room—305."

"Why, that was the number of one of the rooms assigned to my party," Mr. Nichols observed.

"There's been some mix-up," the clerk said in distress. He turned again to the two women. "Your reservation isn't on file, Mrs. Leeds. When did you send the wire?"

"I reserved the room by letter," the woman informed him coldly.

"It was never received here I am sure."

"No doubt the letter was lost."

"You are certain it was sent?"

"Of course I am," Mrs. Leeds declared icily. "My daughter mailed it. Didn't you, Alicia, my dear?"

A queer expression passed over the girl's face. It struck Penny that she probably had forgotten to post the letter. However, Alicia staunchly maintained that she had.

"It's most provoking that you have misplaced the reservation," Mrs. Leeds said irritably to the clerk. "But of course we can have the room?"

"I am afraid that is impossible, Mrs. Leeds. The room you wanted was reserved for two young ladies." With a nod of his head the clerk indicated Penny and Rosanna.

Mrs. Leeds and her daughter turned to stare somewhat haughtily.

"What other room can you give us then?" the woman demanded angrily.

The clerk cast Mr. Nichols a despairing glance. He knew he was in for trouble.

"Practically everything is taken, Mrs. Leeds. In fact the only available room is on the top floor."

"And you expect us to take that?" Mrs. Leeds cried, her voice rising until everyone in the lobby could hear. "I never heard of such outrageous treatment. Call the manager!"

Penny had risen to her feet. She moved quickly forward.

"There's no need to do that," she said pleasantly. "If Rosanna doesn't mind, I am perfectly willing to exchange rooms with Mrs. Leeds."

"Why, of course," Rosanna agreed. "It doesn't matter to me where I sleep."

Satisfied at having her own way, Mrs. Leeds quieted down. She even thanked the girls graciously for the sacrifice they had made. The clerk gave out the keys.

"Why did you do that?" Mr. Nichols asked gruffly as he and the girls followed a bellboy to the elevator. "Your room up by the roof will be hot as blazes."

"I know, but I didn't see any sense in making such a fuss over a room, Dad. Besides, it's only for one night."

"I'd insist that you girls take my room if it had a double bed."

Penny shook her head.

"No, you came here for a rest. Rosanna and I really won't mind."

The three entered the elevator and a minute later Mrs. Leeds and her daughter likewise stepped into the lift.

"I hope you girls will not find it uncomfortable on the top floor," Mrs. Leeds remarked, trying to make pleasant conversation.

"It isn't very warm tonight," Penny returned politely. "Besides, it will only be for one night. We're going on to Raven Ridge in the morning."

The elevator was whizzing them upward.

"Did you say Raven Ridge?" Mrs. Leeds questioned sharply.

"Yes."

A queer expression had come into Mrs. Leeds sharp, blue eyes. She seemed on the verge of

speaking, then apparently changed her mind.

The elevator stopped at the third floor. Without a word, the woman urged her daughter out the door, following her down the hall.

CHAPTER IV

A Face at the Window

THE little room on the top floor of the hotel was as hot and unpleasant as Mr. Nichols had predicted. Even with all the windows open wide the air still seemed close.

"Rosanna, I shouldn't have forced you into this," Penny said apologetically.

"I've slept in far worse places than this," Rosanna laughed. "We have a comfortable bed and a private bath. I didn't fare half so well at Mrs. Bridges."

"You're a good sport anyway, Rosanna. That's more than could be said for Mrs. Leeds or her daughter."

"I wonder how old the girl is? She looked about our age."

"I'd guess she was two or three years older," Penny returned. "She had so much paint on it was hard to tell."

Both girls were tired from the long day's drive. Rosanna immediately began to undress. Penny sat on the edge of the bed, thoughtfully staring into space.

"Did it strike you as queer the way Mrs. Leeds acted when I mentioned we were going to Raven Ridge tomorrow?" she questioned her companion.

Rosanna kicked off her slippers before replying.

"Well, come to think of it, she did look a little startled. She put on such a scene downstairs that I didn't pay much attention."

"We'll probably never see her again." With a shrug of her slim shoulders Penny arose and began to unpack her overnight bag.

According to the plan which they had worked out with Mr. Nichols, the girls expected to leave for Raven Ridge the next morning directly after breakfast. It was their intention to motor to the mountain resort, inspect the Winters' property and see if they could learn anything concerning Rosanna's uncle. They intended to return either the next night or the one following.

Few guests were abroad when the detective joined the girls at breakfast. It was only a little after seven o'clock.

"Sleep well?" he inquired, looking over the menu.

"Not very," Penny admitted truthfully. She might have added more had not Mrs. Leeds and her daughter entered the dining room at that moment. The two bowed slightly and selected a table in the opposite corner of the room.

"Social climbers," Mr. Nichols said in an undertone. "I can tell their type a mile away."

Breakfast finished, the girls prepared to leave for Raven Ridge. Their bags were already packed and downstairs.

"Now drive cautiously over the mountain roads," the detective warned as he accompanied the girls to the waiting car. "If you can't get back by evening send me a wire."

As Penny took her place at the steering wheel she observed that Mrs. Leeds' automobile had been brought to the hotel entrance by an attendant. Apparently, she too was making an early morning departure.

"You're not listening to a word I am saying!" Mr. Nichols said severely.

"Yes, I am." Penny's attention came back to the conversation. "I'll drive carefully and deliver your precious car back to you without a scratch."

"I wasn't exactly worried about the car."

"Well, there's no need to be uneasy about Rosanna or me. We'll have no trouble."

With a laugh of careless confidence, Penny started the car and drove slowly away. It was not the first time she had driven over mountainous roads. She handled the wheel exceptionally well and used due caution on all of the sharp curves. The brakes were good but she dared not apply them too steadily on the steep inclines.

"We'll have to rush if we get back to Mt. Ashland this evening," Penny announced, slowing down to read a signpost. "I declare, a mountain mile seems to be three times the length of an ordinary mile."

They had gone only a short distance farther when a tire went down. Penny knew it in-

stantly by the feel of the steering wheel. She pulled off at the side of the road.

"Now we are in it," she said in deep disgust. "At least ten miles from a garage. I can change wheels on my own car, but I doubt if I can on Dad's automobile."

The girls waited for a few minutes hoping that someone would come along to help. When no one did, Penny dragged out the tools, and after considerable trouble succeeded in jacking up the rear axle.

"I see a car coming," Rosanna reported hopefully.

"Let's flag it," Penny suggested. "I could do with a little masculine help."

In response to her signal of distress, the approaching automobile slowed down. The driver was a man and there were no passengers.

"He's stopping," Penny said in relief.

There was a screech of brakes as the automobile came almost to a standstill. Then surprisingly, it speeded up again. But not before Penny had caught a fleeting glimpse of the driver's face.

"Well, of all things!" Rosanna exclaimed indignantly. "I call that a mean trick."

"I believe he was afraid to stop," Penny announced excitedly. "I think I recognized him. It was the same man who stole the ring from Bresham's Department Store!"

"Are you sure?" Rosanna demanded incredulously.

"I couldn't be absolutely certain, of course. He was traveling too fast for me to catch more than a passing glimpse of his face. But if he didn't recognize us, why did he slow down and then speed up?"

"He did act suspiciously. But what can we do about it?"

"Nothing, I'm afraid. We may as well devote our energies to this wheel."

Rosanna was more than eager to help but she had never even seen a tire changed and had no idea how to go about it. After a little annoying experimentation, Penny got the wheel in place and tightened the lugs.

"There, it's done," she said in relief, "but my dress is a mess. I'm afraid we'll have to stop

at the first garage and have the old wheel fixed, for I don't carry another spare."

A signpost at the next bend in the road advised them that Simpson's Garage was located only six miles away. They made it in a few minutes. There was no town, only a post office, one general store, and the garage which obviously was a remodeled blacksmith shop.

"I'm glad it's nothing more than a tire which needs repairing," Penny commented as the garageman came to learn what they wanted.

He promised that the tire would be ready in half an hour. Glancing at her wrist watch, Penny saw that it was already past lunch time. She inquired if there was a cafe nearby.

"Not in Hamilton, there ain't," the garageman told her. "Ma Stevens, across the street in the big white house, serves meals to tourists now and then."

Rather than spend an unpleasant half hour in the garage, the girls walked over to the rambling white house. They were reassured to see that the yard was well kept and that everything appeared orderly and clean.

"Let's take a chance on the food," Penny decided. "I'm hungry enough to eat a fried board!"

Mrs. Stevens, a motherly looking woman in a blue checked gingham dress, opened the door. She looked slightly troubled at their request for food.

"It's later than I usually serve," she explained. Then noticing their disappointed faces, she added hastily: "But if you're not too particular, I can find you something."

The "something" consisted of a generous platter of mountain trout, fresh from the stream and fried to a golden brown, French fried potatoes, a salad, and cherry pie.

"Dear me, after such a meal, we may not be able to get to Raven Ridge," Penny remarked, finishing her second piece of pie. "I never ate so much in my life."

"Did you say you were going to Raven Ridge?" Mrs. Stevens inquired.

"Yes, we're waiting now to have a tire patched."

"You're the second party through here today

that's heading for Raven Ridge," Mrs. Stevens informed. "A man stopped for lunch about an hour ago. Only he thought it wasn't cooked well enough for him."

"He must have been particular," Penny commented. "What did he look like?"

"He was tall and dark and he had a sharp way of watching one."

"I wonder if it could have been that man who passed us on the road?" Penny mused. "Was he driving a gray coupé?"

"Yes, I believe he was."

Penny was convinced that the man Mrs. Stevens described was the same person who had declined to help her on the road. She wondered what business took him to Raven Ridge. Could she have been mistaken in believing him to be the thief who had stolen the diamond ring?

Paying for the luncheon, the girls went back to the garage. The tire was ready for them. Soon they were on their way again.

They had driven for perhaps an hour when Penny observed that the road seemed to be leading them out of the mountains. She began to

wonder if they had taken a wrong turn. She stopped at the next filling station to inquire. To her dismay, she was told that she had traveled nearly twenty miles out of her way.

"I thought this didn't seem like the right road," Penny declared ruefully to her companion. "Now we'll be lucky to get to Raven Ridge by dinner time, to say nothing of returning to Mt. Ashland tonight."

"I've put you to a great deal of trouble," Rosanna said regretfully.

"Not at all. This trip to Raven Ridge is an adventure, and I like it. It will be more fun to stay over night anyway."

An occasional road marker reassured the girls that at last they were on the right highway. The mountain curves were sharp, and Penny did not make as good time as she had anticipated. She became a little alarmed to see that storm clouds were rapidly gathering.

"It looks as if we may have rain," Rosanna commented.

"A great deal of it, I'd judge. Those clouds are black as ink."

In less than half an hour the storm struck them in full force. A great gust of wind dashed huge drops of water against the windshield, there was a vivid flash of lightning, then the rain came down in steady sheets.

Even with the wiper going Penny could see only a few feet ahead of the windshield. She pulled up under a huge oak tree at the side of the road. The girls waited a quarter of an hour and still the rain fell in torrents. At length, however, it slackened slightly, and not wishing to lose any more time, Penny cautiously drove on.

"It can't last much longer," Rosanna said optimistically.

Despite her hopeful words, the rain showed no sign of stopping. Penny reconciled herself to a slow pace for the remainder of the journey. she was beginning to grow tired. Her back and arms ached and it was a strain to keep such close watch of the road.

With the sun hidden from view, night came on early. Nervous at the thought of driving over unfamiliar mountain roads after dark, the

girls did not stop for dinner. Nine o'clock, in a pouring rain, found them drawn up at a filling station to inquire how much farther it was to Raven Ridge.

"Why, you're practically there now," the attendant informed. "What place are you looking for?"

"The Jacob Winters' estate," Penny replied.

"Then keep on this road for about two miles more. When you come to the top of the ridge, take the gravel road to the left. It will lead you to the house. There's no one there though, unless maybe a caretaker."

"Oh," Penny murmured, "then perhaps you can direct us to a place where we can spend the night."

"The nearest is at the town of Andover, five miles beyond the Winters' place."

The girls thanked the man for his assistance, and once more followed the winding road up the mountainside.

"Shall we go on to Andover or stop at the Winters' house?" Penny asked her companion.

"I don't know what to do," Rosanna faltered. "We're both so tired."

"The place surely must have a caretaker, Rosanna. Let's take a chance and stop."

At the top of the ridge they watched for the gravel road and were elated to find it. The entrance was barred by a white gate. Rosanna stepped out in the rain to open it.

"This may have been a foolish thing to do," Penny admitted as they drove between tall rows of whispering pines. "We could have gone on to Andover only I dreaded driving down the mountainside with slippery roads."

Rosanna huddled closer to her friend. The road was dark and the rustling of the wind in the pine needles made her uneasy.

Soon they came within view of the house. It was built of native stone, half hidden by the luxuriant growth of shrubbery and trees which surrounded it. No lights gleamed in the windows.

"There's no one here," Rosanna declared.

"Let's knock anyway. The caretaker may be at the rear somewhere."

They parked the car as close to the front door as possible and made a dash for the porch. Penny knocked several times on the massive door but there was no response.

"We might try your key, Rosanna," she proposed. "If it fits I'll begin to think there's something to that mysterious letter you received."

Rosanna groped in her pocketbook for the key. Impatient for action, Penny turned the handle of the door. To her astonishment the latch clicked.

"Why, the door is already unlocked, Rosanna!"

"But of course we won't dare go in."

"Why not?"

"Well, it doesn't seem right. The people may not be at home."

"Someone must be around or the door wouldn't be unlocked. Besides, you have a key, Rosanna. And according to the letter, this is your inheritance."

Penny swung wide the door. She peered inside but could see nothing. Her hand groped for the electric switch. She found the button

by the door and pressed it. Instantly everything was flooded with light.

The girls found themselves in a long, narrow living room. The ceiling was beamed, the furniture was rustic, and a great fireplace occupied one end of the wall.

Penny crossed over to the hearth. There was no fire but logs were in readiness to make one.

"I don't feel right about coming in here," Rosanna said nervously.

"Nonsense, if it's your property you're not trespassing," Penny insisted. "Besides, it looks to me as if you were expected, for everything seems in readiness for guests. I'm going to build a fire and see if I can't thaw out my chilled bones."

Reluctantly, Rosanna went to help her. Soon they had a roaring fire in the hearth. As they grew more comfortable they took more interest in their surroundings. The room was plainly but expensively furnished. Curious objects from many lands occupied the tables and bric-a-brac shelves.

"Your uncle must have lived an interesting

life," Penny commented, picking up a tiny ivory box from a nearby stand.

"Yes, Mother often told me——"

Rosanna's voice broke in the midst of the sentence. Turning, Penny saw that her friend's eyes were fastened upon the window. All color had drained from Rosanna's face. Her eyes were dilated with fear.

"What is it?" Penny demanded.

Rosanna clutched her hand.

"I saw someone just then," she whispered. "A man's face at the window!"

CHAPTER V

The Lost Key

PENNY turned quickly toward the window. She saw nothing save the rain trickling down the panes.

"You must have imagined it, Rosanna."

"No, I didn't. I know I saw a face."

Rosanna huddled close to Penny. She was afraid.

"I'll go and look out," Penny proposed daringly.

Before Rosanna could stop her she moved to the door and flung it open. A man in oilskins confronted her. His face was half hidden by the felt hat which he wore low over his eyes.

"What do you want?" Penny asked nervously.

Without answering, the man stepped into the room. Under the electric light he did not look as terrifying as he had at first glance. Penny saw when he swept off his dripping hat that he

was an elderly man although spry for his years. She felt slightly reassured.

"I came to find out what you mean by entering Mr. Winters' house when he's away?" the man demanded curtly. "Don't stand there staring like a blind owl! Answer."

Rosanna had completely lost her power of speech, so Penny tried to explain the situation. She told how they had been caught by the storm and mentioned Rosanna's key and letter which gave her right to investigate the property.

"So you're old Jacob Winters' niece?" the man questioned gruffly, peering intently at Rosanna. "At least that's what you say."

"Of course he's my uncle, although I never saw him," Rosanna defended. "I can prove it by my letter."

"Probably wrote it yourself," the man snapped. "But let's see it anyway."

"Just a minute," Penny interposed, feeling that it was time the newcomer answered a few questions of his own. "Are you the caretaker of this house?"

"Yes, and no. I'm a neighbor of Mr. Winters

and he asked me to keep an eye on his house while he was away. I saw the light in the windows and came to see what was wrong."

"My uncle is dead," Rosanna said quietly. "I have inherited the estate."

"Jacob Winters dead!" the man exploded. "Why, I had a card from him last week. Mailed from some place down in Africa. Let me see that letter you claim to have."

Rosanna opened her pocketbook and searched for it. A troubled look came over her face. She was certain she had placed both the letter and the key in the inside compartment. Now she could find neither.

"So you haven't got it?" the man said suspiciously.

"I must have it somewhere. I can't imagine how I misplaced it. You remember the letter don't you, Penny?"

"Of course. You had it in your pocketbook the last time I saw it. We're telling you the absolute truth Mr. ——"

"Caleb Eckert," he supplied. "If you didn't have a key how did you get into the house?"

"Why, the door was open—that is, it was unlocked," Penny explained.

Caleb Eckert peered at her sharply as if trying to make up his mind if she were speaking the truth. Rosanna, who by this time had emptied her purse out upon the table, was growing more upset every minute.

"Oh, let's leave this house, Penny," she burst out. "I've lost the letter and the key and so we've no right to be here at all. I didn't mean to trespass. I wish we'd never have come at all. That letter has caused me so much grief."

Rosanna looked as if she might cry at any moment. Caleb Eckert softened.

"Now, I wouldn't want you to go out into this storm. As far as I'm concerned you may stay here for the night."

"We don't care to intrude," Rosanna said stiffly.

"It isn't safe to go down the mountain in this rain," the man declared, adopting a more friendly tone. "Now don't be offended by the way I acted. My bark is worse than my bite."

"We can't blame you for being suspicious,"

Penny admitted. "It may be that someone played a joke on Rosanna in sending her the letter and key. We were afraid of that from the first."

Caleb Eckert's eyes roved to the crackling fire, then to the splattered windows.

"Tell you what," he proposed gruffly. "You girls stay here for the night. In the morning we'll see if we can't straighten things out."

"But if Mr. Winters is alive we have no right to use this house," Rosanna protested weakly.

"You're his niece, aren't you?" Caleb demanded. "Jacob Winters wouldn't turn anyone out in a storm, much less one of his own kin folks. Have you had supper?"

The girls admitted that they had not had any food since lunch time. Caleb led them to the kitchen, showing them where canned goods were stored.

"If you're handy with a can opener there's no need to starve," he declared.

The girls thanked him for his trouble. Rosanna timidly ventured a few questions concerning her uncle.

"Did you never see him?" Caleb asked.

"No, once I wrote him a letter but he never answered. I've heard Uncle Jacob was very eccentric."

"Some might call him that. He liked to live alone and mind his own business which is more than most folks do. He traveled a lot too. I guess he must have visited every country in the world." He added slyly: "If Jacob *is* dead, you'll come into possession of some valuable things."

"I hope that nothing has happened to him," Rosanna said sincerely. "I don't really care for riches. All I want is a home."

"Jacob Winters never liked girls."

"I know," Rosanna sighed. "I guess that's why he never answered my letter."

"You counted a lot on the inheritance, didn't you?" Caleb questioned shrewdly.

Rosanna flushed but did not deny the accusation.

"I thought that it might make my future more secure," she acknowledged. "Since Mother died I've battered around from one rooming house

to another. But even if I don't come into the inheritance, I'll be glad that my uncle is still alive."

"I don't know that he is," Caleb Eckert said hastily. "He was alive when he sent that postcard from Africa. Since then we've had no word from him here at Raven Ridge."

While the girls prepared food for themselves, Caleb sat by the kitchen stove watching. He showed them how to start a fire in the range but would not partake of supper when it was cooked.

"Had mine four hours ago. I'll show you where you can sleep and be getting on home."

"Do you live near here?" Penny asked curiously.

"Not far. If the rain would let up you could see my cabin through the dining room window. It's perched on the edge of the cliff, overlooking Lake Chippewa."

Rosanna remarked that the scenery around Raven Ridge must be beautiful.

"'Tis," Caleb agreed enthusiastically. "You'll have to walk down to the lake in the

morning. There are some mighty pretty trails to follow too."

"If we have time before we go, we'll surely explore," Penny promised.

Caleb conducted them upstairs, opening the door of one of the bedrooms. It was stuffy and dusty but otherwise ready for occupancy. Penny turned back the coverlet of the bed and found that it was equipped with clean sheets and blankets. The furniture was massive and all hand carved.

"I guess you can make out here for one night," Caleb said.

"We'll be very comfortable," Penny assured him.

Returning to the lower floor, Caleb lighted his lantern and prepared to leave. With his hand on the door knob he turned to face the girls again.

"Oh, yes, there was something I forgot to mention. If you hear queer noises in the night don't be upset."

"Queer noises?" Penny echoed.

Caleb nodded soberly.

"Folks around here claim the house is haunted but I never took stock in such stories myself. I just thought I'd warn you."

And before the girls could recover from their astonishment, he firmly closed the door, disappearing into the rain.

CHAPTER VI

Midnight Visitors

"I WISH," Rosanna commented emphatically, "that I had never brought you to this queer old house."

Penny laughed as she went over to the fireplace and dropped on another stick of wood. She stood watching the sparks fly up the chimney.

"I think Caleb Eckert was only trying to be funny when he warned us of ghosts," she declared. "At any rate, I'm too tired and sleepy to care much whether the place is haunted or not."

"It's a good night to sleep," Rosanna admitted, going to the window. "I believe the storm is getting worse."

Rain pounded steadily upon the roof and the wind was rising. It whistled weirdly around the corners of the house. The tall maple trees which shaded the front porch bent and twisted and snapped.

For a time the girls sat before the fire. Presently Penny suggested that they retire.

"I don't believe I can sleep a wink tonight," Rosanna protested. "Even though Caleb Eckert said it was all right for us to stay here, I don't feel entirely easy about it."

"I don't see why not," Penny protested as they mounted the creaking stairs to their bedroom. "According to the letter, you've inherited the house. And you have a key."

"I had a key you mean. I can't understand how or where I lost it."

In thinking back over the activities of the day, Rosanna could not recall taking either the key or the letter from her purse. However, several times for one purpose or another she had opened her pocketbook, and it was quite likely that the articles had fallen out unobserved. She thought possibly she might find them on the floor of Penny's car. She intended to search in the morning.

The upstairs room was damp and chilly. The girls hurriedly prepared to retire. Penny put up the window, snapped out the light and made

a great running leap which landed her in bed.

"Listen to the wind howl," she murmured, snuggling drowsily into her pillow. "Just the night for ghosts to be abroad."

"Don't!" Rosanna shivered, gripping her friend's hand. "I can almost imagine that someone is coming up the stairway now! I'm afraid of this lonely old house."

"I won't let any mean old ghost get you," Penny chuckled teasingly. "I love stormy nights."

Rosanna lay awake long after her companion had fallen asleep. She listened restlessly to the crash of the tree branches against the roof, the creaking of old timbers and boards. But the steady beat of rain on the windowpanes had a soothing effect upon tense nerves. Presently she dozed.

Suddenly she found herself wide awake. She sat upright in bed, straining to hear. She was convinced that some unusual sound had aroused her.

Then she heard it again. A peculiar pounding noise downstairs.

She clutched Penny by the arm.

"What is it?" the latter muttered drowsily.

"Wake up! I think someone is trying to break into the house!"

As the words penetrated Penny's consciousness, she became instantly alert. She too sat up, listening. Someone was pounding on the front door.

"What shall we do?" Rosanna whispered in terror.

Penny sprang from bed and snapped on the light. "I'm going to dress and go down. It may be Caleb Eckert."

"Or a ghost," Rosanna chattered. "If you're going down, so am I."

With the appearance of a light in the bedroom, the clanging on the door increased in violence. Penny, who was dressing as rapidly as she could, began to grow irritated.

"Are they trying to break down the door?" she grumbled. "I should think whoever it is would know we're hurrying."

Without delaying to lace up her shoes, she ran down the stairs, Rosanna close at her elbow.

Before snapping on the living room lights the girls peered out the window.

Slightly reassured by the appearance of the midnight visitors, they cautiously unbolted the front door.

Mrs. Everett Leeds and her daughter Alicia, swept into the room. Both were bedraggled and obviously out of sorts.

Mrs. Leeds shook the rain from her cape, flung her wet hat into the nearest chair, and then coldly surveyed the two girls.

"What are you doing here, may I ask?" she inquired.

"We *were* sleeping," Penny smiled.

"I mean, what are you doing in this house?"

"It seems to belong to Rosanna," Penny said evenly. "She inherited it from her uncle, Jacob Winters."

Mrs. Leeds' expression was difficult to interpret. For an instant she looked stunned. But she quickly recovered her poise.

"Nonsense!" she said shortly. "This house belongs to me. Jacob Winters was my cousin. He died recently, leaving me everything. I have

a letter and key to prove it. Naturally I couldn't use my key to get into the house for you had it bolted from the inside."

Mrs. Leeds looked accusingly at the girls as she offered the letter to Penny. A casual glance assured the girls that it was identical with the one Rosanna had received and lost.

"It's too late to go into this tonight," Penny protested. "Let's discuss it in the morning."

"Very well," Mrs. Leeds agreed coldly. "Where are we to sleep?"

Penny informed her that there were several empty bedrooms upstairs. She led the way to the upper floor. Opening the door of one of the rooms, she was surprised to see that it was not as well furnished as the bedroom which she and Rosanna shared. Mrs. Leeds uttered an exclamation of disgust.

"Surely you don't expect me to sleep here, Miss Nichols. The room is dirty. Positively filthy."

"Look at that long cobweb hanging from the ceiling!" Alicia added indignantly. "I'd have hysterics if I slept here."

"Perhaps the adjoining room is better," Penny commented.

An inspection revealed that if anything it was even more neglected.

"I'm afraid you'll just have to make the best of it for tonight," Penny declared, "unless you care to drive on to the next town."

"We'll stay," Mrs. Leeds decided instantly. "I'd prefer to sit up all night, rather than brave those horrible mountain roads again."

"We slipped into a ditch coming here," Alicia informed. "That's what made us so late. We've had a terrible time."

In a closet at the end of the hall, Penny and Rosanna found blankets and linen. As they made up the beds, neither Mrs. Leeds nor her daughter offered to assist. It was after one o'clock when the girls went back to their own room.

"Mrs. Leeds means to make trouble about the inheritance," Penny remarked in an undertone as they snapped out the light once more. "I wonder if by any chance she could have picked up your letter and key?"

"Oh, I doubt it," Rosanna returned. "I remember when we were at Mt. Ashland she dropped the hint that she was going to Raven Ridge. At least, she acted strangely when we mentioned the place."

"Yes, she did. I had forgotten for the moment. Oh well, in the morning we'll learn exactly what she intends to do."

Penny rolled over and soon was sleeping soundly. Toward morning she awoke to hear a clock somewhere in the house chiming four. At first she thought nothing of it, then it occurred to her that no one had wound any of the timepieces the previous evening. While she was musing over such an odd happening her keen ears detected the sound of soft footsteps in the long hall outside.

"It's probably Mrs. Leeds or her daughter," she reasoned.

The sounds persisted. At length Penny quietly arose and tiptoed to the door. She looked out into the dark hall. No one was within sight. Mrs. Leeds' door was closed.

Penny went back to bed, taking care not to

awaken Rosanna. Scarcely had she pulled the blankets up than the soft pad of footsteps could be heard again.

"I hope it isn't that ghost Caleb warned us about," she thought uneasily. "Oh, bother! I know there aren't any ghosts!"

Penny closed her eyes and tried to sleep but found it quite impossible. Even after the noise in the hall ceased she caught herself listening for the footsteps. At a quarter to seven she dressed and stole downstairs to see what she could find for breakfast.

At eight o'clock when Rosanna came into the kitchen, Penny had coffee, cereal and crisp bacon ready.

"The larder seems very well supplied," she informed cheerfully. "Someone left milk on our doorstep too. I imagine it must have been Caleb."

"I'm hungry enough to eat anything," Rosanna declared. "Shall I call Mrs. Leeds and Alicia?"

"Yes, do, although I don't know how they'll take to my cooking."

Rosanna went upstairs to rap on Mrs. Leeds' door. She returned a minute later, reporting that neither of the guests would be down for breakfast.

"They were quite put out at being disturbed so early," she told Penny ruefully.

"We'll let them get their own breakfasts then. Come on, we'll have ours anyway."

Penny had learned to cook very well under the tutelage of Mrs. Gallup. She had done remarkably well with the meager supplies at her disposal and Rosanna declared that the breakfast was excellent.

The girls had finished the dishes and were stacking them away when Alicia came down the stairs.

"Mother and I will take our breakfast now," she informed.

Rosanna started toward the kitchen, but Penny neatly blocked the way.

"Sorry," she said cheerfully, "but we've just finished ours. You'll find supplies in the kitchen."

Alicia started to reply but without waiting

to hear what she might have to say, Penny and Rosanna went out the back door.

"While she cools off we may as well look over the grounds," Penny laughed. "If Mrs. Leeds and Alicia expect to get along with me, they'll have to learn that this household is going to operate on a cafeteria basis."

From the rear door a sandstone path led down a steep incline to the brow of a high cliff. A river wound its way directly below, emptying into a crystal blue lake. Deep in the pine woods, some distance from the path, a cabin could be seen. The girls decided that it must belong to Caleb Eckert.

While they were admiring the rugged scenery, someone came up behind them. They wheeled about to face Caleb himself.

"Well, well, you both look bright and gay this morning," he greeted heartily. "Sleep well?"

"Quite well," Rosanna told him shyly. "That is, we did until the visitors arrived."

"Visitors?"

Rosanna explained about Mrs. Leeds and her daughter while Penny added omitted de-

tails. For some reason they both were beginning to feel that Caleb was their ally.

"All this talk about letters and keys and inheritances certainly has me puzzled," he proclaimed, shaking his head. "It's hard to believe that Jacob Winters is dead. I think I'll walk back to the house with you and have a little talk with Mrs. Leeds."

"Did you leave milk at our doorstep this morning?" Penny questioned as they returned together.

Caleb admitted that he had placed it there.

"You've been very kind," Rosanna said gratefully. "I want to thank you before we leave."

"You're not aiming to leave today?" Caleb asked quickly.

"Well, yes, I imagine we will. I don't feel right about staying here."

Caleb lowered his voice. "Take my advice, Miss Winters, and don't leave while that other woman and her daughter are here. From what you've told me, I think they mean to grab the property."

"But what can I do?" Rosanna asked help-

lessly. "I've lost my letter and the key. I haven't any proof that the property was left to me."

"Maybe this Leeds woman hasn't any proof that it was left to her either," Caleb said sagely. "Anyway, we'll find out what she has to say."

At first, Mrs. Leeds, accosted in the living room of the old house, had little comment to make. She was out of sorts from lack of sleep the previous night, and the breakfast which she and Alicia had endeavored to cook had not been a success. Nor was she impressed with Caleb who wore high boots, an old pair of dirty trousers and a crumpled felt hat.

"I don't see why I should discuss my business affairs with you," she said aloofly. "I have inherited this property from my cousin and I mean to remain here in possession of it indefinitely if necessary."

"May I see the letter which you say you received?" Caleb inquired.

Mrs. Leeds hesitated, then reluctantly handed it over. Caleb studied it briefly and returned it.

"You will require more than this as evidence

of Mr. Winters' death," he said quietly. "For all I know, you may have forged this letter."

"Preposterous!" Mrs. Leeds snapped. "I refuse to discuss the matter with you further. I shall send for my attorney and he will straighten out everything."

"Not without the will, he can't," Caleb returned grimly. "And there's no telling what became of it."

"The will?" Mrs. Leeds caught him up. "Are you sure there was a will?"

"Mr. Winters told me once that he had made one and hidden it somewhere in the house."

"Then of course it can be found."

"Mr. Winters wouldn't want anyone prying around in his private papers," Caleb insisted. "Until I have definite word that he is dead, I can't let anyone hunt for it."

"I shouldn't call searching for the will exactly prying!" Mrs. Leeds retorted indignantly. "What right have you to say what is to be done here? Are you the carêtaker?"

"Well, not exactly, but Mr. Winters asked me to look after things until he got back."

"That will must be found."

Caleb's face tightened. "Mrs. Leeds," he said severely, "I repeat, things in this house must not be disturbed."

Mrs. Leeds drew herself up proudly. "Unquestionably, the will leaves everything to me."

"That may be," Caleb acknowledged, "but this girl here has a claim too." He indicated Rosanna.

Mrs. Leeds froze her with a glance. Her eyes snapped like brands of fire as she listened to Rosanna's account of the letter and key. But a look of relief, which was not lost upon either of the girls, came over her face as she learned that they had been misplaced.

"The story sounds ridiculous to me," Mrs. Leeds declared coldly. "If you can't produce the letter or the key, what proof have you that you actually are Jacob Winters' niece?"

"I could get evidence within a few days," Rosanna declared. "The letter and key may show up too."

"I think perhaps you dropped them in the car," Penny interrupted. "Let's look now."

Leaving Mrs. Leeds and Caleb embroiled in another argument, they went outside where the automobile had been parked near the house. A careful search of the flooring and pockets of the car did not reveal the missing letter or key. Rosanna was completely discouraged.

"Do you think Mrs. Leeds could have picked it up?" she asked gloomily.

"I don't see how," Penny returned thoughtfully. "But there's one thing certain. She intends to make trouble. You surely don't intend to go away from here while she and her daughter are camped in the house?"

"What else can we do?"

"Send a wire to Dad that we're staying on a day or two," Penny answered instantly.

"But won't that inconvenience both of you?"

"No, I suspect Dad will be grateful for the rest and as for myself, I'd enjoy seeing this thing through."

It required little urging to convince Rosanna of the wisdom of remaining on the scene. She had taken an immediate dislike to Mrs. Leeds and her daughter, and agreed with Penny that

they were determined to claim more than a rightful share of the inheritance.

Once the girls arrived at a decision they lost no time in driving to the nearest town where Penny dispatched a message to her father. Noticing an inviting looking restaurant, they ate lunch before motoring back to the Winters' mansion. It was nearly two o'clock when they reached the Ridge again.

An unfamiliar car stood on the driveway. Penny was certain it did not belong to Mrs. Leeds for her mud-splattered sedan was parked some distance away.

"It looks like more visitors," she commented as they crossed the veranda together.

At the doorway both girls involuntarily paused. Mrs. Leeds was engaged in conversation with a stranger.

For an instant Penny and Rosanna stood and stared. It was the same man who had refused them help on the road.

CHAPTER VII

"Ghost" Music

AS PENNY and Rosanna entered the living room, the stranger turned to face them. For a long moment Penny was convinced that he was the shoplifter who had stolen the diamond ring from the Belton City department store. His build was the same and the general lines of his face were similar. Then the man spoke and she was not certain at all. The tone of his voice was entirely different as was his abrupt manner of speaking.

A trifle nervously, or so it seemed to Penny, Caleb Eckert introduced the stranger.

"Max Laponi," he said. "He represents himself as a nephew of Jacob Winters."

"Not only do I represent myself as such, but I have proof that I am Uncle Jacob's nephew," the stranger retorted. "You'll find my credentials in order. I've come to take over the estate."

The girls were not greatly surprised when he took from his pocket a letter similar to the one which Mrs. Leeds had produced. They were more impressed with the other papers which he offered for Caleb's inspection—a birth certificate, a letter of identification from a well known Chicago banker and various legal documents.

"It looks to me as if someone has played a joke on all you folks," Caleb said slowly. "We don't know that Mr. Winters is even dead."

"Oh, yes, we do," Max Laponi insisted, producing another letter. "This came from my attorney this morning. It definitely states that Mr. Winters—Uncle Jacob—was buried at sea."

Caleb sank down in a chair. He scarcely read the letter although his face had turned an ashen hue.

"I can't believe it even now," he murmured. "There must be some mistake."

"There's no mistake," Max cut in sharply. "It's clear enough that I am the heir too. By the way, didn't the old man have a valuable collection of ivories?"

Caleb stiffened visibly. "Ivories?" he asked blankly.

"Sure, some pieces he collected years ago on his tours. Read about it in the paper."

"Oh, so you read about it?" Caleb echoed significantly.

"Uncle Jacob told me about the collection too. He always intended me to have it."

"Then you should know where to find it," Caleb retorted bluntly. "I'm sure I don't."

With that he turned and walked to the door. There he paused to fling over his shoulder:

"I wash my hands of the whole matter. You folks will have to fight it out among you."

Mrs. Leeds had managed to hold her tongue very well, but the moment that the door closed behind Caleb, she began an angry attack upon Rosanna and the newcomer, accusing both of being impostors. Unwilling to listen to such an unreasonable tirade, Penny and Rosanna fled out of doors.

"Such a mad house!" Penny exclaimed, taking a deep breath. "I have to keep pinching myself to believe it's real!"

"I never saw such a hopeless muddle," Rosanna added. "Everyone is so eager for the property no one gives the slightest thought to the tragedy which befell poor Mr. Winters."

"Perhaps he isn't dead," Penny suggested.

Rosanna stared. "What makes you think that? Didn't Mr. Laponi have proof of it?"

"He seemed to have proof of everything," Penny admitted with a rueful laugh. "That's what makes me suspicious. There's something strange about this entire affair."

"I agree with you there."

"I'm convinced of one thing, Rosanna. Either Mrs. Leeds or this man Laponi is an impostor. At first I thought Laponi was the same person who stole the ring. Now I can't be sure."

Rosanna did not believe that the two were identical although she admitted there was a close resemblance. However, she was quite willing to agree that the man seemed like an impostor despite his credentials.

"He may have picked up that letter and key you lost," Penny went on, thinking aloud. "And

there was something rather sinister in the way he mentioned the collection of ivories."

"I noticed that. Caleb seemed disturbed."

"It wouldn't surprise me if he knows where Mr. Winters kept the collection," Penny continued. "At any rate, he's wise to pretend ignorance. With such a mad lot of people in the house, anything might happen."

Noticing a nearby path which led to a spring house, the girls followed it, drinking of the cool mountain water. They sat down on a bench which afforded a view of the tall chalk-like cliffs. After a time they felt soothed and tranquil again. They presently walked back to the house.

Max Laponi was nowhere to be seen although Alicia told them that he was busy moving his things into one of the upstairs bedrooms.

"Mother's worried since he came," the girl confided, growing more friendly. "They had a dreadful quarrel. Now she's hunting for the will."

"But Caleb Eckert warned her not to do that," Penny protested.

"That old meddler has nothing to do with

this place," Alicia declared with a toss of her head. "I hope he minds his own business and stays away."

The girls found Mrs. Leeds in the library. She was going through the drawers of the desk in systematic fashion, tossing papers carelessly on the floor. One drawer was locked. She shook it viciously.

"Like as not Jacob Winters' will is locked up in there," she said irritably. "I'm half a notion to break into it."

"Oh, you mustn't do that," Rosanna cried indignantly, before she could check herself.

"And why shouldn't I?" Mrs. Leeds demanded tartly. "Jacob Winters is dead isn't he? And his will must be found. I suppose you're afraid to have the document come to light for fear you'll be cut off completely."

Rosanna's cheeks flushed.

"I never thought of such a thing, Mrs. Leeds. I think it's disgraceful the way everyone is acting about the property!"

Before Mrs. Leeds could reply, she ran from the room. Penny loyally followed, joining Ro-

sanna in the bedroom which they shared. She found the orphan in tears.

"Forget it," Penny advised kindly. "Mrs. Leeds is so intent on getting the money that she doesn't realize what she says."

"I'm sorry I ever came here. I want no part in this disgraceful grab for Uncle Jacob's money."

"I know how you feel," Penny agreed, "but let's stay a day or two. I'm curious to learn just what is going on here."

In truth, she was completely baffled. It was difficult for her to make up her mind whether or not the entire arrangement was a hoax. Somehow she had distrusted Laponi's credentials. She distrusted him too.

"I don't believe he could be a nephew of Jacob Winters," she thought. "I wish there was some way to trace down his past."

It was clear to Penny that Rosanna would never defend her claim to the inheritance. Unless she personally took a hand in the affair, Mrs. Leeds and Max Laponi would ignore the orphan completely.

"I'll let them make the first move," she decided shrewdly. "For the time being I'll play a waiting game."

For the greater part of the afternoon, Penny and Rosanna remained in their own room. Toward nightfall they walked about the grounds and later motored to a nearby inn for dinner. At nine o'clock when they returned to the big empty house, the downstairs was dark. They judged that Mrs. Leeds and Max Laponi had already gone to their rooms.

"We may as well turn in too," Penny suggested. "The mountain air makes one drowsy."

Both girls were soon sound asleep. However, sometime later Penny was awakened by the sound of footsteps in the hall. She thought little of it, and rolling over, tried to go to sleep again. Suddenly she heard soft music from above.

She sat up in bed, listening. A strain of a famous opera resounded through the room, rising in volume, then falling away. Penny knew that she was not imagining it. She nudged her companion who quickly awakened.

"Do you hear the same thing I do?"

Rosanna clutched the sheets more tightly about her.

"Ghost music," she whispered in awe.

"It sounds like pipe organ music coming from a long distance away," Penny whispered. "I'm going to find out!"

Before Rosanna could prevent it, she stole from bed and swiftly tiptoed to the door.

CHAPTER VIII

The Ivory Collection

PENNY quietly opened the bedroom door, peering out into the long dark hall. She could hear the music distinctly. It seemed to be coming from almost directly overhead.

By this time, Rosanna, overcoming her fear, crept beside her friend. They huddled together, listening.

"It's an organ. I'm sure of it," Penny whispered. "But where can it be hidden?"

"I'm afraid of this place," Rosanna chattered. "Let's lock the bedroom door and leave in the morning."

Penny made no response. For that matter she did not even hear for she was intent upon trying to localize the sound of the music. Never inclined to be superstitious, she had no thought that the old house was haunted. She felt certain that the ghost-like music was man made.

"This house must have a third floor or an

attic," she declared softly. "Let's see if we can find our way up."

"Never!"

"Then I'm going alone."

Penny started off down the hall. Rosanna hesitated, and then, unable to watch her friend walk into danger alone, hurriedly followed. Halfway down the hall she reached for the electric switch but Penny caught her hand before she could turn on the light.

"Don't! It would give warning that we're coming."

Groping about in the dark the girls went past Mrs. Leeds' bedroom and the one occupied by the stranger. Penny noted that the doors of both were tightly closed. At the end of the hall she found still another door. Gently she turned the handle and opened it. A steep flight of stairs led upward.

"Oh, please, let's not go up," Rosanna pleaded, trembling.

"You stay here," Penny said in a whisper. "If anything goes wrong, let out a cry for help."

The mysterious music had ceased for the mo-

ment. Penny waited until it began again, and then, following the sound, crept noiselessly up the stairs leaving Rosanna on guard below.

At the top of the last step Penny paused to listen again. Actually, she was not as courageous as she had pretended. She could hear her own heart pounding.

It was so dark on the third floor that at first she could distinguish nothing. The music had increased in volume and Penny was more sure than ever that it came from a hidden pipe organ.

As her eyes focused better she found herself standing upon a small landing from which branched two closed doors. After a slight hesitation she tiptoed to the nearest one and opened it a tiny crack.

Although no sound had betrayed her, the music from within ended with a discordant crash. Startled, Penny allowed the door to swing wide. She started forward, and suddenly tripped. Until that moment her nerve had held steady. But as she stumbled and fell she uttered a shrill cry of terror.

Rosanna, fearing the worst, came running up the stairs.

"Penny! Penny! Are you hurt?"

Reassured by her friend's voice, Penny scrambled to her feet and met Rosanna at the door.

"I'm all right," she said shakily. "But I've done enough investigating for one night!"

"What frightened you so?"

"I'll tell you later."

They lost no time in returning to the lower floor. Down the hall, Mrs. Leeds' door had opened. A light flashed on.

"What is going on here?" Mrs. Leeds demanded, emerging into the hallway. "Such a house I never saw! First it's music—then a scream! It's enough to send one into hysterics."

Penny and Rosanna could not refrain from smiling, for Mrs. Leeds looked ridiculous in her curlers which were sticking out from her head at all angles. Before they could answer, Alicia joined her mother.

"I should think you could go to your room and let folks sleep!" she said irritably. "You've

been running up and down the hall all night."

"You're wrong there," Penny returned. "This is the first time Rosanna or I have stirred from our room. We got up to investigate the mysterious music."

"Then you heard it too?" Mrs. Leeds breathed in awe. "I thought perhaps I had imagined that part of it."

"No, you heard music all right," Penny told her grimly.

"It isn't—you don't think the house is haunted?" Alicia stammered nervously. "That old man—what's his name—was trying to tell us about someone having died in a room on the upper floor!"

"Well, the music seemed to come from the third floor," Penny informed, relishing the effect which her words produced. "As for the scream, I can account for that. I tripped and fell. Now I think we may as well all go back to bed. There's been so much commotion that I rather judge our 'ghost' has been frightened away for the time being."

"I can't sleep a wink after all this has hap-

pened," Mrs. Leeds declared. "I shall sit up until morning."

"As you wish," Penny said indifferently. "I'm going to bed."

As she walked down the hall to her own room she glanced rather sharply at the door of Max Laponi's room. It was still tightly closed.

"Our friend appears to be a sound sleeper," she remarked to Rosanna.

In the privacy of their bedroom, Rosanna demanded to know exactly what had happened.

"Well, I didn't see much," Penny admitted. "But I did learn one interesting thing. There's a pipe organ installed in this house. I might have discovered who was playing it too only I tripped over a rope which had been strung up in front of the door."

"Placed there deliberately, you think?"

"Of course. It startled me so that I let out that wild yell. I don't care to do any more investigating tonight, but in the morning I mean to have a good look at that room upstairs."

"You have more nerve than I," Rosanna declared admiringly.

Penny carefully locked the outside door before turning out the light. It was twenty minutes after twelve by her wrist watch.

"I shouldn't call it nerve exactly," she replied thoughtfully, climbing into bed. "The truth is, I'm a little afraid, Rosanna."

"Then why do you go up there again?"

"Oh, I don't mean that. It isn't the music that has me frightened."

"But what else is there to be afraid of?" Rosanna persisted.

"It's just a feeling, I guess," Penny admitted. "I can't explain—only it seems to me that some sinister plot is brewing in this old house."

"I have the same sensation," Rosanna confessed. "Let's leave in the morning."

Penny laughed softly and settled herself more comfortably in the pillows.

"Never!" she retorted. "I'm the daughter of a detective you know! This is our own special mystery case, and unless that ghost gets me first, I intend to get him!"

With that threat, Penny rolled over and lost herself in sleep.

The warm sun was streaming in at the windows when the girls aroused themselves. They dressed and went downstairs, finding the house quite deserted. Apparently Mrs. Leeds, her daughter and Max Laponi had gone to the village for breakfast.

"I wish they had vanished for good but there's no use hoping that," Penny commented. "I doubt if even a ghost could keep Mrs. Leeds from remaining until the estate is settled."

The girls cooked their own breakfast, utilizing supplies which they had purchased at the nearby town. As they washed the dishes and stacked them away, Rosanna mentioned again that she did not feel comfortable about making such free use of her unknown uncle's property.

"Perhaps it isn't just the thing to do," Penny acknowledged, "but the situation isn't a normal one either. If Mr. Eckert says it is all right for us to stay on, I don't think we should worry."

"Will it do us any good to remain?" Rosanna pondered in a troubled tone. "If Mr. Eckert

can't tell us what became of my uncle, who could?"

"That's just the point, Rosanna. I believe he knows more than he lets on."

Penny's gaze wandered to the tiny log cabin set back in the pine woods. Wisps of thin smoke curled from the chimney. That meant that Caleb must be at home.

"Let's walk down there and talk with him," she proposed impulsively. "It's time he answers a few of our questions."

Caleb did not come to the door to answer their timid knock. Instead he called out a hearty, "Come in," which they instantly obeyed.

Caleb was the picture of comfort, sitting propped back in his chair by the window, puffing at an old pipe. He arose reluctantly and dusted off two camp stools for the visitors.

"We thought perhaps you might furnish us with a little information," Penny began pleasantly.

Her eyes roved swiftly about the room. She noticed the open bookcase with four rows of well-thumbed volumes. The titles were impres-

sive. Caleb Eckert, despite his rough appearance, seemingly had a liking for intellectual books.

"Well, what is it you want to know?" Caleb demanded, not unkindly. "I've told you before that I'll have nothing to do with this muddle over Mr. Winters' property."

"I've given up all hope of inheriting any of the estate," Rosanna said. "But I should like to hear about my uncle. What was he like?"

"Some folks said he was the queerest man on Snow Mountain. I liked him because he attended to his own business. He was considered a remarkable sportsman by some."

Penny's eyes traveled to a huge bear skin which hung on the cabin wall. Caleb followed her gaze.

"Mr. Winters gave me that skin last year when he came back from his trip north. A mighty nice specimen."

"Do you have a picture of Mr. Winters?" Penny asked, abruptly changing the subject.

Caleb shook his head. He began to talk about

the bear skin again. Rosanna listened eagerly, but Penny sensed that the old man was trying to monopolize the conversation and thus keep her from asking questions which he did not care to answer.

When she succeeded in breaking in it was to bring up the subject of Mr. Winters' ivory collection. Caleb seemed reluctant to offer definite information.

"All I know is that Mr. Winters was supposed to have one," he answered. "Folks said it was worth a fortune and that he had spent years gathering it."

"What became of the collection?" Penny inquired curiously.

"How should I know?" Caleb retorted crossly. "Seems to me you girls ask a lot of silly questions."

"We didn't mean to be inquisitive," Penny apologized. "Only it struck me that Max Laponi has an unusual interest in that collection of ivory."

Caleb eyed her strangely. "So you noticed it too?" he asked.

Penny nodded. "Perhaps I shouldn't say it, but I don't trust that man, Mr. Eckert. If Mr. Winters' collection of ivory is still in the house, don't you think it should be removed to a safer place?"

"That's what I'd like to do," Caleb muttered, looking out the window.

"Then you do know where the ivory collection is," Penny tripped him.

Caleb glared at her. "I didn't say so, did I? Why should Mr. Winters tell me where he kept his valuables? Bosh! I tell you I won't be mixed up in the muddle. Now go away and let me sleep!"

Caleb stretched himself out on the couch and closed his eyes. Thus dismissed, the girls hastily departed.

"Such a cross old man!" Rosanna exclaimed when they were out of earshot. "But even though he is irritable, I rather like him."

"So do I," Penny admitted with a laugh. "You know, I think our questions about the ivory collection disturbed him more than he cared to show."

"He did seem reluctant to tell us anything about it."

"We'll nail him down yet," Penny declared grimly as they walked slowly toward the house on the cliff. "Unless I'm sadly mistaken, that ivory collection is hidden somewhere on the premises and he's scared silly for fear someone will find it!"

CHAPTER IX

A Scrap of Paper

PENNY and Rosanna entered the house by the side door. Hearing a murmur of voices from the direction of the library, they involuntarily paused to listen.

"If we go into this thing as partners we're both bound to profit," they heard a man say in an insistent tone. "Think it over and I know you'll see how easily it can be accomplished. Those two girls are nit-wits. They'll make no trouble."

Penny and Rosanna exchanged a startled glance. They recognized Max Laponi's voice. So he was plotting against them! Undoubtedly, planning to secure complete control of the Winters' estate.

"I'm going to find out with whom he is talking," Penny whispered.

Before Rosanna could protest, she walked to the library door and opened it. Mrs. Leeds and

Max Laponi were sitting at the desk, examining some document which was spread out before them. As Penny came in, Laponi whisked it into his pocket.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," Penny said casually. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

"You aren't at all, my dear," Mrs. Leeds said more graciously than was her custom. "Mr. Laponi was just showing me a letter from his sister."

"Yes, from my sister," Laponi echoed with a slight smirk. "She lives in Naples and writes such interesting letters."

Penny found it difficult to refrain from smiling. She pretended to search in the bookcase for a volume.

"I thought possibly you had discovered the will," she remarked mischievously.

"The will! Oh, no!" Mrs. Leeds assured her.

"That is a good joke," Laponi echoed. "Ha! Ha! Even a ferret couldn't find old Jacob Winters' will in this house!"

Penny was aware that both Mrs. Leeds and Max Laponi were watching her shrewdly, try-

ing to make up their minds if she had overheard anything. She dared say no more lest she betray herself. Picking up a book she quietly withdrew.

"It's just as I thought," she told Rosanna when they were together in their bedroom. "Laponi is trying to get Mrs. Leeds involved in some scheme to steal the property. Unless we watch out, Rosanna, they'll get everything away from you."

"I don't much care," Rosanna returned in disgust. "I never saw such disgraceful actions in all my life. As far as I'm concerned, I'd rather leave this place tomorrow and let the lawyers settle everything."

"There will be nothing left to settle when Mrs. Leeds and Laponi get through. It's pretty evident that one or the other is an impostor."

"But we can't prove that, Penny. If only I hadn't lost my key and the credentials!"

"We're only starting to work on this case," Penny said cheerfully. "Let's keep our eyes and ears open. We may discover something of value."

Since their arrival at the old house, the girls had awaited an opportunity to inspect the third floor, hoping to discover the cause of the mysterious music which had disturbed the household. Penny suggested that while Mrs. Leeds and Laponi were occupied in the library they might make their tour of investigation. Rosanna agreed but without enthusiasm. She was not as venturesome as her companion.

Penny led the way to the third floor landing. The hall was dark and dusty; cobwebs hung from the corners of the ceiling.

Penny cast an appraising glance about her. The doors leading from the hall were all closed. She was certain that upon her previous visit one had been slightly ajar.

She reached for the knob and turned it. The door did not give. It was locked.

"That's funny," Penny murmured.

"What is?"

"I'm sure this door was unlocked before."

"Perhaps it was the other one," Rosanna suggested.

They moved on down the hall to try the

second door. It too was securely fastened.

"I distinctly recall opening that other door," Penny maintained. "I started to go in and tripped over something. I suspect it was a rope stretched just inside the door."

"Well, if we can't get in I guess we can't learn anything," Rosanna said, somewhat in relief.

Penny made no response. She bent down to peer through the keyhole.

"See anything?" Rosanna asked.

"Just a big empty room. But there is something up against the far wall! Rosanna, it's a pipe organ!"

After a minute she stepped away that her friend might see for herself. Rosanna agreed that the shadowy outline was an organ and a magnificent one.

"The music came from this room all right," Penny said excitedly. "I wish we could get in."

After trying the door again, the girls returned to the second floor. As Penny closed the stairway door she noticed that it had a key. Upon impulse she turned it in the lock and pocketed the key with a smile of satisfaction.

"That should put a stop to the music for a few nights," she remarked. "I'll show that ghost I can lock a few doors myself!"

As they reached their own bedroom, Rosanna said that she believed she would lie down for a half hour. The events of the past few days had worn her down, both physically and mentally.

"Do," Penny urged. "A sleep will refresh you. I think I'll go downstairs and see if I can discover what plot is brewing."

She descended the spiral stairway and paused at the library. It was empty. The house was strangely silent. Penny crossed the hall to the living room. Heavy draperies screened the arched doorway. As Penny pulled them aside to enter, she saw Mrs. Leeds standing at the fireplace, her back to the door. Something about her manner aroused Penny's suspicions. She waited and watched.

Mrs. Leeds had built up a roaring fire on the hearth. She held a paper in her hand. Deliberately, she tore it into a dozen pieces and dropped them into the flames.

Penny hastily entered the room.

Mrs. Leeds wheeled, her cheeks flushing. "How you startled me, Miss Nichols! You surely have a way of coming in quietly."

"Sorry," Penny said, walking over to the hearth. "How nice to have a fire, although it is a little warm today."

"The room seemed damp," Mrs. Leeds said nervously. "I was cold. I think I'll go to my room and get a sweater."

The instant Mrs. Leeds had disappeared, Penny snatched a charred piece of paper from the hearth. It was the only scrap which had not been completely consumed by the flames.

Only a few scattered lines with many words missing were visible. The others were blackened or torn away.

Penny distinguished a part of the writing: "Last will and testam— —do bequeath to my niece, Ro—"

"This must be a portion of Jacob Winters' will!" she thought. "Mrs. Leeds probably found it somewhere in the house and decided to destroy it because she or her daughter weren't mentioned!"

She stared at the word which began Ro——. The remaining letters had been torn away. Had Mr. Winters written Rosanna's name? If only she had entered the living room a minute earlier she might have prevented the document from being destroyed!

In reviewing Mrs. Leeds' actions during the past two days, Penny could not doubt that the woman had actually found the missing will. Since her arrival at Raven Ridge she had spent most of her time poking about into odd corners of the house. The locked drawer of the desk had annoyed her exceedingly.

"I'll just take a look and see if it's still locked," Penny thought.

She opened the desk and tried the drawer. It readily opened.

"Empty," Penny commented grimly. "Just as I suspected."

She examined the lock. It was evident at a glance that it had been broken by a sharp instrument and not unlocked with a key.

"The will was hidden in this drawer," she mused. "I feel confident of it. And it must

have been drawn up in Rosanna's favor or Mrs. Leeds never would have destroyed it."

Penny closed the desk and carefully placed the charred bit of paper in her dress pocket. She was deeply disturbed over the discovery, realizing that Mrs. Leeds, by destroying the document, had gained a great advantage. However, she had no intention of abandoning the fight.

"I'll keep this strictly to myself," she decided. "For the present I'll not even tell Rosanna. It would only disappoint her to learn that the will has been burned."

Since Mrs. Leeds' arrival at Raven Ridge, Penny had done everything in her power to avoid a break with the arrogant society woman. She had ignored snubs and many unkind remarks. Now she felt that if Rosanna's interests were to be safeguarded, she no longer could afford to play a waiting game.

"Mrs. Leeds and Max Laponi have shown their hand," she reflected. "They mean to gain their ends by any possible means. But since they're stooping to underhanded tricks, I may have a few little schemes of my own!"

Penny was unusually silent that evening. Rosanna noticed it at once but thinking that her friend was absorbed in her own thoughts, refrained from questioning her.

At six o'clock the girls motored to Andover for dinner. To their chagrin, Mrs. Leeds and her daughter Alicia chanced to select the same cafe. All during the meal, Penny noticed the woman's eyes upon her. As she and Rosanna arose to leave, Mrs. Leeds hastily followed them.

"Miss Winters, may I speak with you a moment?" she began coldly.

"Why, yes, of course," Rosanna responded.

"I mean alone."

Rosanna hesitated and glanced at Penny. The latter started to move away.

"No, don't go," Rosanna said quickly. "I am sure that anything Mrs. Leeds may wish to say to me can be said in front of you."

"Very well," Mrs. Leeds returned icily. "Evidence has reached me today which proves conclusively that I am Jacob Winters' sole heir."

Rosanna took the blow without the quiver of an eyelash.

"What evidence, may I ask, Mrs. Leeds?"

"I don't feel compelled to go into that, Miss Winters. Certainly not in the presence of strangers or on the street."

"Penny isn't exactly a stranger," Rosanna smiled.

"From the first I have been very tolerant, I think," Mrs. Leeds went on, ignoring the orphan's remark. "By your own admission you have no credentials—we have only your word that you are even related to Jacob Winters."

"I had a letter and key—the same as you," Rosanna faltered. "Either I lost them or they were stolen."

"And Rosanna happens to be a niece of Mr. Winters," Penny added significantly. "I believe you are only a cousin, Mrs. Leeds?"

The woman eyed her furiously.

"Just what is it that you want me to do?" Rosanna asked.

"I think you both should leave immediately."

"And allow you to have everything your way," Penny interposed sweetly. "Now wouldn't that be nice—for you!"

She took Rosanna by the arm and urged her toward the car.

"Don't allow Miss Nichols to poison your mind!" Mrs. Leeds pleaded, following Rosanna to the curbing. "Unless you leave immediately you will receive no part of the fortune. If you go without making any further trouble, I might agree to some small settlement. After all, I mean to be generous."

"Thanks for telling us," Penny smiled.

She closed the car door and they drove away.

"Perhaps we shouldn't have been so short with her," Rosanna said uneasily as they returned to the house on Snow Mountain. "If it's true that the property has been left to her, then she was being generous to offer to give me anything."

"Don't worry, she'd forget her promise soon enough if she succeeded in getting you away from here, Rosanna. I detest that woman. She thinks she is so subtle and she's as transparent as glass!"

"I wonder what evidence she referred to?" Rosanna mused.

Penny started to speak, then changed her mind. Although Mrs. Leeds had no suspicion that she guessed the truth, she was well aware of the nature of the new evidence. However, she refrained from mentioning the burned will, realizing that Rosanna, in her present depressed state of mind, would be greatly disturbed by the information. If the orphan believed that she no longer had a definite claim to the fortune, she would insist upon leaving Raven Ridge without further delay.

Penny did not intend to quit the scene until she had answered several questions to her satisfaction.

The entire case seemed a trifle fantastic as she reviewed it. First, Rosanna had received the strange letter signed by a fictitious name. Then, although the orphan had lost the key, they had found the door of the Winters' mansion unlocked. Close upon the heels of their arrival, Mrs. Leeds, her daughter, and Max Laponi appeared. Since then, the house had been disturbed by haunting organ music and one baffling event had crowded upon another.

"It's all very bewildering," Penny reflected. "But I believe that everything can be fitted together if only I am able to learn the identity of the mysterious ghost."

The night closed in dark and windy. Penny and Rosanna sat by the fire, trying to read. They were relieved when Mrs. Leeds and her daughter retired to their rooms shortly after eight o'clock for it gave them an opportunity to talk. At ten o'clock the girls went to their own room. Max Laponi had not yet returned from Andover where he took his meals.

Penny was tired and fell asleep almost as soon as her head touched the pillow. Hours later she was awakened by Rosanna who was sitting upright in bed.

"What is it?" Penny mumbled drowsily.

Then she knew. The house reverberated with the soft chords of a pipe organ.

Without switching on the electric lights, Penny drew on her dressing gown. She started toward the door, then returned to grope in the drawer of the dresser where she found the key which locked the door leading to the attic floor.

"What are you going to do?" Rosanna asked anxiously, drawing the bedclothes closer about her.

Penny already had gone. Stealing quietly down the dark hall she reached the end of it and stood listening. The door leading to the third floor was closed. She could hear the music more distinctly than before and knew for a certainty that it came from above.

She gently tried the door. It was still locked.

Penny was momentarily baffled. She had half expected to find the door unlocked. She had been so confident that by taking the key she could put a stop to the ghost music.

"How did the organist reach the third floor if he didn't pass through this door?" she debated. "That ghost must be quite a clever fellow if he can enter without keys."

The entire house had been carefully locked up for the night. Penny and Rosanna had attended to it the last thing before retiring, knowing that Max Laponi could come in later by using his own pass key. They had secured every door and window.

"Well, I won't learn anything by standing here," Penny thought uncomfortably. "I'll have to go up there." Her usual courage was at low ebb. She dreaded the ordeal.

However, before she could open the stairway door, a shrill scream echoed down the hall.

Terrified, Penny crouched back against the wall and waited.

CHAPTER X

The Wall Safe

RECOVERING from her fright, Penny reached up and snapped on the light. She heard a door open down the hall. Mrs. Leeds, a dressing gown clutched about her unshapely figure, stumbled toward the girl.

"There's something in my room! It struck my face while I was sleeping! Oh, oh, such a horrible house!"

"Control yourself," Penny advised, taking her by the arm. "We'll see what it is."

Mrs. Leeds jerked away, assuming an attitude of tense listening. For the first time she had paid heed to the organ music from above.

"There it is again!" she whispered in awe. "This house *is* haunted."

Rosanna came down the hall, joining the two at Mrs. Leeds' door. Alicia huddled nearby, too frightened to speak a word.

Penny opened the door and groped for the

electric switch. As the room was flooded with light, she looked quickly about. Everything was in disorder but that was because Mrs. Leeds had done no straightening or cleaning since her arrival.

Suddenly Penny began to laugh.

"Pray what do you find that is so humorous?" Mrs. Leeds demanded indignantly.

"Bats!" Penny answered, laughing again.

There were four of them blinded by the light, cowering in the corners of the room. Penny opened a window and with Rosanna's help drove them out into the night.

"They must have come in through an open window," she said to Mrs. Leeds.

"I didn't have a window open," the woman retorted. "I can't bear to sleep in this room again. Tomorrow I shall move into another. Come Alicia, we'll sit up until morning in the living room."

Returning to her own room, Penny listened for the organ music. It had ceased as mysteriously as it had begun. She glanced curiously toward the room occupied by Max Laponi.

The door was closed. He alone of the entire household seemed undisturbed by the strange things which went on about him.

"I'd like to know if he really is in his room," Penny thought.

She hesitated by the door but did not have the courage to try the knob. After a moment she followed Rosanna to their bedroom at the other end of the hall.

Morning found Mrs. Leeds even more upset than upon the previous night. Her eyes were bloodshot, her face sallow, her clothes unpressed. She quarreled with her daughter and ignored Penny and Rosanna. However, when Max Laponi came down the stairs looking as dapper as ever, her attitude instantly changed. She spoke to him in a softer tone.

"We were beginning to wonder if the ghost made off with you last night," she said archly.

"What ghost?"

"You mean to say you didn't hear the music?"

"Not a sound," Laponi told her. "I am a very hard sleeper."

He seemed disinclined to listen to Mrs.

Leeds' account of all that had transpired, and very shortly drove away in his automobile, ostensibly to have breakfast in a nearby town.

After straightening their room and making the bed, Rosanna and Penny went for a short walk. They sat down by the cliff where they could see the river below, discussing the situation.

"I don't see that it's doing a particle of good to stay here," Rosanna insisted. "I don't feel right about letting you waste so much time and money."

Rosanna was thinking of the expensive meals which they bought at Andover. Because her own supply of cash had run so low, Penny paid for everything. Rosanna meant to settle the debt and it steadily grew larger.

"Now don't worry," Penny advised kindly. "I'm staying on here largely because I've determined to discover the identity of our ghost. Then, too, I can't bear to see Mrs. Leeds gain what doesn't belong to her."

"I'd be glad to stay if I thought it would do the slightest good—"

"I think it will Rosanna. I have a scheme which I intend to try. It will take a few days before we can work things out."

Penny then explained a part of what was in her mind. She was not certain as to all the details of her plan, but little by little it was taking shape.

After a time the girls walked down to Caleb Eckert's cabin. He was not at home. They sauntered leisurely back to the house on the cliff.

Neither Mrs. Leeds' car nor the one belonging to Max Laponi was on the driveway.

"I guess we're the only ones here this morning," Penny commented.

They entered by the front door. From the direction of the living room they heard a muffled exclamation of impatience. Signaling for silence, Penny tiptoed toward the velvet curtains which hid the living room from view. She parted them.

Caleb Eckert was working at the dials of a wall safe which had been concealed in a secret panel behind a large oil painting.

Although the girls had made no sound, Caleb sensed their presence. He turned and faced them.

"Why, Mr. Eckert, doesn't this call for some explanation?" Penny asked in bewilderment. "Surely you have no right to tamper with Mr. Winters' safe."

The old man plainly was embarrassed. He moistened his lips, looked away, then said gruffly:

"I didn't come here to steal. I came because I wanted to protect Mr. Winters' valuables. There's folks in this house that I don't trust."

"But how does it happen you know the combination of the safe?" Rosanna inquired.

"Mr. Winters gave it to me before he left. You see, he was my best friend. Jacob trusted me."

"He must have," cut in a sneering voice from directly behind.

Everyone turned to see Max Laponi standing in the doorway. His sharp little eyes moved swiftly about the room taking in everything. They came to rest upon the wall safe.

Caleb spun the dials. He hastily pressed a concealed button and the picture swung back into place, hiding the safe.

"Neat little device," Laponi commented dryly. His eyes narrowed. "Trying to steal the Winters' booty, were you?"

"Certainly not," Caleb retorted angrily.

Laponi caught him roughly by the shoulder, forcing him back against the wall.

"You know a lot more than you let on," he accused. "Tell me, is that where old Winters hid his ivory collection?"

"I'll tell you nothing," Caleb snapped.

"You'll tell or I'll—"

"Mr. Laponi, you're hurting him!" Rosanna cried.

"Perhaps we should call the police if there's to be trouble," Penny added cunningly.

At the mention of police, Laponi instantly released his grip on Caleb. He laughed harshly.

"We'll let it go this time," he said, "but I'm warning you, Eckert, stay away from this house and this safe if you know what's good for you."

"You might take that advice to yourself, too," the old man retorted, edging toward the door.

From the window the girls watched him hurry down the path to his own cabin. His departure was almost flight. Obviously, Caleb was afraid.

Penny did not know what to believe. An hour before she would have taken oath that he was strictly honest, devoted to the interests of Jacob Winters. Now she could not be sure.

Max Laponi lingered in the living room. Suspecting that he intended to investigate the wall safe the instant he was alone, Penny and Rosanna settled themselves for a long stay. They pretended to read.

After an hour, Laponi grew tired of the game, and went off, grumbling to himself.

"We outlasted him that time," Penny chuckled. "However, we'll have to be on the lookout or he'll sneak back sometime when we're gone. I wonder if Mr. Winters did leave his ivory collection in the safe?"

"Laponi seems to think so," Rosanna commented. "I'm glad he doesn't know the combi-

nation. I distrust him even more than I do Caleb."

"So do I, but I intend to watch them both," Penny responded thoughtfully. "I'm convinced there's a deep plot brewing—something far more sinister than we've suspected."

CHAPTER XI

A Night Adventure

SINCE taking leave of Mr. Nichols at Mt. Ashland, Penny had received no word from her father. She did not worry actively, yet it was a great relief when later in the afternoon a uniformed messenger boy delivered a telegram into her hand.

"Remain as long as you wish," her father wired. "Am enjoying good rest here."

From an upstairs window Mrs. Leeds had noted the arrival of the messenger boy. She came hurrying down to see if the message was for her. While Penny read the communication, the woman eyed her suspiciously.

At last her curiosity could no longer be restrained. She asked carelessly: "I don't suppose your wire has anything to do with Jacob Winters or the estate?"

"Only indirectly," Penny responded mischievously.

To avoid further questioning, the girls went outdoors.

"Let's see if Caleb is at home," Penny proposed.

They rapped several times upon the door of the cabin and were about to turn away, when the old man opened it.

"Sorry to bother you," Penny apologized. "I wanted to ask a few more questions about Mr. Winters."

Caleb looked ill at ease. "Questions!" he fumed. "Well, what is it you want to know this time?"

"Tell me, isn't there a pipeorgan on the third floor of Mr. Winters' house?"

"Certainly. Jacob was a talented musician. He installed the organ nearly fifteen years ago. But what of it may I ask?"

"We'd like very much to see the organ."

"Well, why don't you look at it then?"

"We can't because the door is locked."

"Locked?" Caleb seemed surprised. "That's funny. I didn't know Mr. Winters ever locked up his conservatory."

"Then you haven't a key?" Penny asked.

"Why should I have a key?" Caleb snorted. "You act as if I'm the caretaker of that house. It's nothing to me what goes on there, except that I don't like to see folks overrun the place and steal Mr. Winters' fine things."

"You needn't look at us so accusingly," Rosanna said with surprising spirit. "We wouldn't take or damage one single thing in that house."

Caleb's face softened.

"I didn't mean to suggest that you would. I believe you two girls aren't like those others. But you were speaking of the organ. Why are you so interested in it?"

"Because we've been hearing music at night," Penny informed. "It seems to come from that room on the third floor."

Caleb regarded her in awe. "Then it's true, the things they say."

"What things?" Rosanna asked impatiently.

"That the house is haunted. If Mr. Winters really is dead it may be——"

"Nonsense!" Penny cut in. "Rosanna and I don't believe in ghosts. And what's more, I

doubt if you do, Caleb Eckert! That so-called ghost is a very live one. If you won't help me, I'll solve the mystery alone!"

And with this declaration, Penny stalked from the cabin, followed by the faithful Rosanna.

"Perhaps you've antagonized him now," the latter said as they went back to the house on the cliff.

"I don't care if I have! Caleb knows a great deal more than he pretends. He could help us if he wanted to!"

No one was stirring on the lower floor of the Winters' house when the girls entered. To Penny it seemed an admirable time to institute a search of the premises.

"We'll let Mrs. Leeds hunt for the will," Penny declared, "but we'll look for something which may prove equally valuable."

"What?" Rosanna asked curiously.

"A picture of Jacob Winters."

"I can't see what good it will do to find one except that I'd like to have a photo of my uncle as a keepsake."

"If my plans work out I'll have a more important use for it," Penny smiled mysteriously.

"I should think we could find one somewhere in the house," Rosanna declared. "Most people have old photographs stuck around in odd places."

For nearly an hour the girls poked about in drawers and clothes closets until Rosanna protested that she felt as prying and sneaking as Mrs. Leeds.

"This is in a better cause," Penny laughed.

"It looks that way to us because it's my cause," Rosanna smiled. "Still, I'd never examine private papers or locked drawers."

Penny made no response for in a lower table drawer she had come upon an old album. She displayed her discovery and page by page the girls went through it, laughing a little at the strange old-fashioned costumes and the stiff poses of the subjects. Names were written under a few of the photographs but Rosanna recognized only one or two as relatives.

"I never knew many of my relation," she ad-

mitted. "If Mrs. Leeds and her daughter are samples, perhaps it's just as well."

"The people in this album look nice, Rosanna. I suppose most of them are dead by this time."

Penny turned a page and stared blankly down at an empty folder.

"Why, here is your uncle's name," she cried, indicating a signature at the bottom of the page. "But the photo is gone!"

"Oh, how disappointing."

"Someone removed the photo, Rosanna. Perhaps deliberately too."

"What makes you think that?"

"I only said it. I have no evidence of course. Oh, all my plans will be upset if I don't find the photograph!"

The arrival of Mrs. Leeds cut short the conversation. The girls hastily returned the album to the table drawer but not quickly enough to avoid being detected. Mrs. Leeds triumphantly pounced on the leather bound book.

"Only an old-fashioned album," she said in disappointment, tossing it aside.

"Did you think it was the will?" Penny chuckled as she and Rosanna departed.

The girls impatiently awaited the coming of night. Penny had determined to make a supreme effort to discover the cause of the mysterious organ music. At first Rosanna had been enthusiastic over the plan but as nightfall approached she tried to dissuade her friend.

"It's too dangerous," she insisted. "Please give up the scheme."

Penny shook her head. She had made up her mind to spend the night on the third floor. Soon after the household retired she intended to steal upstairs and establish herself by the door of the conservatory.

Evening came. At nine Mrs. Leeds and her daughter shut themselves into the bedroom which they had selected since their upsetting experience with bats. At eleven Penny heard Max Laponi's door close.

She looked out into the hall. It was dark and deserted.

"Please don't attempt it," Rosanna shivered. "What if something should happen?"

"I hope it does," Penny said grimly. "It won't be any fun to sit up half the night without any purpose. I'll be disappointed if our ghost fails to provide his usual midnight concert."

"If anything goes wrong scream for help," Rosanna urged. "I'll run for assistance."

Penny promised. While Rosanna stood at the bedroom door watching, she tiptoed down the hall, past Mrs. Leeds' room, past Laponi's chamber to the third floor stairs.

There she hesitated. Without a light the region above looked even more dark and awe-inspiring than she had remembered it.

"Coward!" she accused herself, and quietly went up, leaving the door unlocked behind her.

All was quiet on the third floor. Penny tried the door to the conservatory expecting to find it locked. To her astonishment it opened. The discovery disconcerted her for an instant. A minute later she mustered her courage and stepped inside the room.

In the darkness she could make out objects only vaguely. The organ with its huge pipes

occupied one end of the room. Sheet-draped chairs gave everything a ghostly atmosphere not at all conducive to a peaceful state of mind.

After making a brief inspection of her quarters Penny sat down on the floor with her back against the outside door. She riveted her eyes upon the organ.

Time dragged slowly. When it seemed to Penny that several hours must have passed, she heard a clock downstairs striking eleven-thirty.

"At least another half hour to wait," Penny thought, shifting into a more comfortable position.

She grew drowsy. Several times she caught herself on the verge of napping. She aroused herself only to find her eyes growing heavy again. It became increasingly difficult to watch the organ.

"I wish that ghost would hurry up and come," she mused impatiently. "Perhaps after all my trouble this won't be one of his working nights!"

That was the last thought of which she was aware. Suddenly she heard soft organ music rolling and swelling about her. With a start

she aroused herself. She had been sleeping.

It took an instant for Penny to gather her wits. She was still sitting with her back to the conservatory door. Yet at the far end of the great room, she distinctly could see a shadowy figure seated at the organ.

Penny scrambled to her feet, starting forward. The floor creaked alarmingly.

Penny halted, but too late. She had given warning of her presence.

The shadowy figure at the organ jerked into alert attention. There was a discordant crash of chords, then silence.

Penny blinked. She thought she had heard a sharp click as if a secret panel had opened and closed. That was all.

And the organist had disappeared.

CHAPTER XII

A Suspicious Act

PENNY caught herself shivering. She decided that she had seen quite enough for one night.

She turned toward the door, but with her hand on the brass knob, stood tensely listening. Someone was tiptoeing along the hall. It occurred to her that the mysterious organist might have escaped from the music room by means of a secret panel which opened directly into the adjoining corridor. Even now he could be effecting his escape to the lower floor.

Crouching against the wall, Penny waited. She was startled to hear the footsteps coming closer. Then the door opened a tiny crack and the beam of a flashlight slowly circled the room.

"Penny!" an anxious voice whispered. "Where are you?"

Penny laughed in relief as she reached out to grip Rosanna's hand.

"Oh! How you startled me!" the girl gasped. "I'm so glad you're safe, Penny. You stayed up here so long that I was frightened."

"I had to wait for the ghost."

"I heard the music," Rosanna said in awe. "It broke off so suddenly."

"That was because I frightened the ghost away. At first I thought perhaps I had dreamed it all, but if you heard the music too then it must have been real."

"It was real enough. But it lasted only a minute or two."

"When the organist saw me I suspect he slipped out of the room by means of a secret panel," Penny reported. "But where he went is a mystery. You didn't see anyone as you came up the stairs to find me?"

"No, I'm sure no one was in the hall, Penny."

"I'm as certain as anything that this room has a secret entrance. Give me your flashlight and we'll see what we can discover."

"Not tonight," Rosanna shivered, pulling her friend toward the door. "We can come back in the morning."

"The room may be locked again then."

"That's so."

"Let's take advantage of the opportunity while we have it."

Rosanna handed over the flashlight and together they crossed the room to the big organ. They inspected it with interest and Penny ran her fingers lightly over the keys. However, no sound came forth.

"That's queer," Rosanna whispered.

"I think someone has to pump air," Penny said. "It's probably shut off."

She next turned her attention to the walls in the immediate vicinity of the organ. She could locate no hidden panel although in one place it seemed to her that when she rapped on a certain sector it emitted a hollow sound.

"It's too dark to see anything tonight," Rosanna protested nervously.

"I guess we may as well give it up until morning," Penny agreed.

The girls stole quietly down the stairs to the lower floor. However, an unpleasant surprise awaited them. As they opened the door into

the main passageway they found themselves face to face with Mrs. Leeds and Alicia.

"So I find you here again!" the woman exclaimed. "I suspected before that you girls were at the bottom of these nightly disturbances. Now I have the proof."

Penny was too annoyed to even try to explain why she had visited the third floor. She would have ignored the woman and passed on to her own room had not Rosanna been so distressed by the ridiculous accusation.

"We've had absolutely nothing to do with the queer things which have been going on in this house," the orphan maintained indignantly.

"Then why were you upstairs at this time of night? Only a minute or two ago Alicia and I heard music."

"We were trying to learn what caused it, Mrs. Leeds."

"A likely story!" Alicia said with a toss of her head.

"You may believe it or not, just as you wish," Penny returned coldly.

"It seems to me, Miss Nichols, that you are

taking it upon yourself to do entirely too much investigating," Mrs. Leeds said cuttingly. "This isn't your home and you're not a relative of Jacob Winters."

"And unless I'm sadly mistaken there are others here who are similarly situated!" Penny retorted.

"Do you mean to suggest that Alicia and I are not related to Jacob Winters?"

"I'm not suggesting anything," Penny replied evenly. "However, since you brought up the matter of an investigation, I might ask you about that paper which I saw you burn in the living room fireplace."

Mrs. Leeds' face changed color and she grew confused.

"Why, I don't know what you're talking about."

"You know well enough, but we'll let it pass for the time being. Come on, Rosanna."

The two girls walked down the hall and entered their own room, closing the door firmly behind them.

"You held your own with her that time," Ros-

anna chuckled. "My, I wish I could talk up to people the way you can."

"I talk entirely too much. But she made me provoked when she accused us of causing all the disturbance in this house."

"What did you mean by asking about a paper she had burned?" Rosanna asked curiously.

"Oh, I just wanted to throw a scare into her," Penny responded evasively as she snapped out the light and crept into bed. "I really have no proof of anything."

Long after Rosanna had fallen asleep she lay awake thinking. Proof! The word seared itself into her brain. If only she could secure some evidence which would aid Rosanna!

"The entire affair seems unreal," she mused. "Almost like a movie. It's obvious that someone is playing at being a ghost, trying to frighten the occupants of this house. But what can be the purpose behind it all?"

Although Penny had been careful to make no such admission to Rosanna, she was becoming increasingly troubled. Nor were her worries confined solely to the hide-and-seek organist.

She feared that the time was fast approaching when Mrs. Leeds or Max Laponi would make a legal claim to the Winters' property.

"The chances are that Mrs. Leeds destroyed the will," she reasoned. "In that event, Rosanna may lose everything.

Penny felt baffled, yet she was unwilling to admit defeat. Certainly not until Mrs. Leeds had thrown all her cards on the table. Events were fast approaching a crisis. Penny sensed that from the woman's attitude of increasing hostility and assurance.

"I'm not defeated yet," she thought grimly as she closed her eyes and tried to sleep. "I still have a few tricks up my sleeve!"

When Rosanna and Penny descended the stairs the next morning they heard a murmur of voices in the library. The door was closed.

"I imagine Laponi and Mrs. Leeds are having another one of their secret conferences," Penny commented. "They're up to some mischief."

"Why not leave this place today?" Rosanna demanded. "I don't care about the fortune any more. I'm so tired of all this plotting and

scheming. I'd rather just go away and let them have it."

"Now don't look so distressed," Penny smiled. "The battle of wits has only begun."

"But I don't like to battle. It isn't my nature."

"I'm your appointed gladiator, Rosanna. You have no idea how much pleasure it would give me to see these grasping imposters exposed."

"We haven't any proof they're imposters," Rosanna said soberly. "After all, they had letters and keys to the house. I haven't even that much."

"It's too bad they were lost, but you mustn't let it worry you," Penny chided. "Right now I'm more concerned over another matter."

"The mysterious ghost?"

"Yes, although I wasn't thinking of that at the moment. It's Mr. Winters' photograph. Who tore it out of the album?"

"For all we know it may have been removed years ago."

"Yes, that's so, but somehow I have a hunch

it disappeared at a far more recent date. If I don't find a picture of Jacob Winters, I'm afraid my little plan will fall through."

"You haven't told me much about this secret plan of yours, Penny."

"That's because I haven't worked it out clearly in my own mind yet. But unless I find the photograph there simply won't be any."

"We might search the house again."

"I intend to do that if we can ever find a time when Mrs. Leeds and Max Laponi are both gone. Just now I'm eager to make another inspection of the organ room upstairs. This is our chance while those two are closeted in the library."

Rosanna was not especially anxious to visit the third floor again, but she offered no objection to the suggestion. Penny led the way up the creaking stairs.

The door of the music room was unlocked as they had left it the previous evening. However, the window shades were all drawn and the room was dark. Penny raised the blinds to admit light.

Curiously, the girls gazed about them. Everything was covered with a thick coating of dust and cobwebs hung in misty veils from the corners of the room. Penny crossed over to the organ. She indicated the bench in front of it.

"I guess that proves whether or not our ghost was real."

"You mean the imprint on the dusty surface of the organ bench?" Rosanna asked doubtfully.

"Yes, you can see where the organist sat."

"Perhaps one of us brushed off the dust without realizing it. You tried to play a few notes on the organ, you know."

"Yes, but I didn't sit down on the bench, Rosanna."

Losing interest in the organ, Penny began to search for the secret panel through which she was firmly convinced that the "ghost" had disappeared. As her eyes moved swiftly over the smooth wall, she suddenly uttered a low exclamation.

"See, Rosanna! The imprint of a man's hand!"

The marking upon the wall was so faint that at first the other girl did not see it. But she too became excited as Penny pointed it out.

"How do you suppose it came to be there?" she asked in awe.

"I suspect our friend the organist was groping about in the dark searching for the secret panel. No doubt his hand was dusty and when he pressed it against the wall it left a faint imprint."

"If you're right, we have a valuable clue as to the location of the panel!"

Penny nodded eagerly. Already she was exploring the wall with her hand.

"It's funny," she murmured impatiently. "I'm as sure as anything that the panel is here——"

She broke off suddenly as her fingers touched a tiny round object which was hidden under the wall paper.

"I believe I've found it!" she exclaimed gleefully pressing the button.

The girls heard a faint click. But the panel did not open.

"The stubborn thing!" Penny cried impatiently. "Why doesn't it open?"

She pushed with both hands against the section of wall where she felt convinced the panel was located. To her own surprise and the horror of her companion, it suddenly gave way.

Penny plunged headlong through the opening. And before Rosanna could recover from the shock of seeing her friend disappear, the panel fell back into place.

"Penny, Penny," she cried anxiously, pounding upon the wall. "Are you hurt?"

For several minutes there was no answer. Then Rosanna heard a smothered little giggle.

"All my bones are still together I guess. But I seem to have tumbled down a flight of stairs. Come on in."

"I don't know how to get in. The panel slammed shut when you fell through."

"It's hinged at the top I think. Find the little button and press on it. Then when you hear a click push on the panel. Only push easy or you'll take a tumble the way I did."

In a minute Rosanna had located the button.

She pressed upon it as she had seen Penny do. Then as the lock clicked, she cautiously pushed against the panel. Light as was her touch the sector of wall swung instantly back and she stepped through the opening. So concerned was she over Penny that she failed to hear the panel close behind her.

At first Rosanna could see nothing. Then as her eyes became accustomed to the gloomy interior she made out a long flight of stone steps leading downward into inky blackness.

She felt reassured when Penny grasped her hand.

"Come on, Rosanna! Isn't it exciting? Let's explore!"

"Oh, it's too dark!" Rosanna whispered nervously. "What if we should run into that dreadful man—the organist?"

"Well, perhaps it would be wiser to go back for a flashlight," Penny conceded. "Only we mustn't let Mrs. Leeds or Max Laponi suspect what we're up to. We must keep this discovery strictly to ourselves."

She returned to the head of the stairs but

although she groped her hand carefully along the wall she could find no hidden button or spring which controlled the panel. By this time Rosanna had grown frightened.

"Don't tell me we're locked in!"

Penny forced herself to speak calmly. She knew that it would never do to let Rosanna realize that she too was alarmed.

"For the moment I'm afraid we are," she admitted quietly. "But don't give up hope. We'll get out of here somehow."

CHAPTER XIII

The Secret Stairs

TEN minutes of unrewarded search convinced Penny that they were only wasting their time in attempting to locate the hidden spring without a light.

"Let's follow the steps down and see where they lead," she suggested. "Surely there must be another exit."

Rosanna permitted Penny to lead her down the steep flight of stairs. They presently reached the bottom. It was too dark to see very much but by feeling along the damp stone wall they discovered that they were in a narrow passageway. As they moved cautiously forward a breath of cold air struck Penny's face.

"This must be the way to the exit," she declared cheerfully. "We'll soon be out of here now."

"It can't be too soon for me," Rosanna chattered.

Hand in hand they groped their way along the subterranean passage. Soon they came to the end of it but instead of an exit they found another flight of steps leading downward at a steep angle.

"Careful or you'll fall," Penny warned as they began the treacherous descent. "Some of the stones are loose."

"I wish we had a light," Rosanna complained. "Where do you suppose we're going anyway?"

"Maybe to the center of the earth," Penny chuckled. "It seems like it anyway."

"Unless I'm mixed up in my directions we're moving toward the lake."

"It seems that way to me too," Penny readily agreed. "But we've twisted and turned so many times I couldn't be sure of anything."

By this time the girls were convinced that they were underground for they had made a long, straight descent. The walls were moist and damp; the air chilly. Yet one thing puzzled them. If they actually were traveling toward the lake that meant that the tunnel had been bored into the side of the cliff. But such a feat

obviously was nothing less than an engineering enterprise.

At length the girls reached the bottom of the second flight of stairs only to find themselves in another passageway. It was much larger than the other and lighter.

"Do you think we could be in an abandoned ore mine?" Penny suddenly demanded, pausing to inspect the walls.

"It does look a little like it. Only I never heard of stone steps in a mine."

"No, they have shafts. But it strikes me that the steps may have been added later. If you noticed, the upper passage was much smaller than this one."

"As if it had been dug out to join with this one," Rosanna added eagerly.

"Exactly. It's my theory that some person knew about this old mine and decided to connect it with a smaller tunnel which would lead up into the house."

"But who do you suppose conceived such a plan?"

"I can't answer that one," Penny laughed.

"But come on, let's see if we aren't approaching the exit."

Eagerly they moved forward, guided by the streak of light. A minute later Penny who was in the lead, gave a joyous shout.

"We've come to the end of it! I can see trees!"

"Thank goodness," Rosanna sighed in relief. "I was afraid we'd never get out alive."

Penny parted the bushes which barred the exit and they peered out.

"You were right, Rosanna. We did travel toward the lake. We're almost in it for that matter!"

The water came within a few yards of the entrance and during a storm the girls imagined that it must flood the lower passageway. Penny noticed a rowboat tied up in a clump of bushes.

"I suppose that's how our ghost makes his quick get-away," Penny remarked dryly.

"We might take a ride on the lake," Rosanna proposed.

"Don't you think it might advertise that we've discovered this tunnel? Especially if the

ghost should happen to see us using his boat."

"Of course, I didn't stop to think. Oh, Penny if only we knew the identity of this person who annoys the household!"

"It shouldn't be so hard to learn it now," Penny declared in satisfaction. "At night we'll station ourselves here by the mouth of the tunnel and watch."

"It wouldn't surprise me if it should turn out to be Max Laponi," Rosanna remarked. "He never seems to be in his room at night."

Penny offered no response.

Fearing that their long absence from the house might have aroused suspicion, the girls hurriedly left the scene. They found a trail which wound along the base of the cliff and which presently took them toward the house on the hill.

As they passed the Eckert cabin they saw the old man cleaning fish by the back door. They greeted him perfunctorily and would have walked on had he not seemed in a mood to talk.

"Out early this morning, aren't you?" he questioned.

"Yes, we were down by the lake," Penny answered.

"You must have crawled out of bed before the sun was up. I've been cleaning fish here all morning and I didn't see you go past."

"We went around a different way," Penny answered, and then before he could ask another question, interposed one of her own. "By the way, do you know where I could get a picture of Jacob Winters?"

Old Caleb dropped his fish knife. It took him a long time to recover it from the ground.

"What do you want of a picture?" he questioned gruffly.

"Oh, I just need it," Penny said evasively.

"I'd like to have one myself," Rosanna added sincerely. "I never had a photo of my uncle."

"If you find he's cut you out of all his property I guess you probably won't be so anxious to have a picture of the old cod," Caleb observed.

Rosanna drew herself up proudly.

"It wouldn't make the slightest difference, Mr. Eckert. After all, my uncle never saw me

so why should he have left me any of his money? You say such disagreeable things!"

"I'm a disagreeable old man," Caleb admitted cheerfully, "but my bark is worse than my bite."

"Well, please don't call my uncle names," Rosanna went on with spirit.

"Names?"

"You spoke of Uncle Jacob as an old cod. I don't like it a bit."

Old Caleb was startled by the outburst. But his eyes twinkled as he replied soberly:

"Well, now, Miss Rosanna, I didn't mean to offend you or to speak disrespectfully of Jacob either. It was just my way of talking."

"Then I'll forgive you," Rosanna smiled.

The girls were on the verge of moving off when Caleb checked them with a question.

"You haven't heard Mrs. Leeds or that Laponi fellow say anything about leaving have you?"

"I don't believe they intend to go unless they're put out," Penny responded. "I heard Mrs. Leeds say the other day that she had sent for her lawyer."

"They stick tighter than cockle burs," Caleb

commented. "If only I had the right, I would send them both packing. Especially that Max Laponi. I don't trust him."

"Neither do I," Penny agreed promptly. "That's why I think you should try to help me clear up this dreadful muddle."

"What can I do? I have no authority."

"It will help if you can find me a photograph of Mr. Winters."

Caleb's face puckered into troubled wrinkles.

"It's too late," he muttered under his breath. "It wouldn't do any good."

"What was that you said?" Penny questioned sharply.

"Nothing. I was just talking to myself. About the picture. I'll see what I can do. Don't count much on getting it though because I doubt if I can locate one for you."

The girls chatted a few minutes longer but Caleb was not very good company. He responded briefly if at all to their conversational sallies and for the most part seemed lost in thought. They soon left him to his fish cleaning and went on toward the house.

"I wonder what got into him all at once?" Rosanna mused. "Perhaps he was offended at the way I spoke to him."

"I don't think he gave it a second thought," Penny responded. "I suspect Caleb rather likes to have folks talk up to him. No, I'm sure it wasn't anything you said that annoyed him. Likely enough it was my request for Mr. Winters' photograph."

"Why should that bother him?"

"That's what I'd like to know. Caleb is a queer one to say the least."

"Do you think he'll ever produce the photo?"

Penny laughed shortly.

"It would be a great surprise to me if he did. And yet from the way he acted, I'm convinced he could get me one if he chose. Like as not he has one in his cabin now."

Penny lapsed into a moody silence. From the day of her arrival at Raven Ridge she had sensed old Caleb's reluctance to help her. While she could not say that he was exactly unfriendly he had made no positive move of assistance. She had believed for a long time that he

knew a great deal more than he would tell regarding Jacob Winters' absence.

The girls entered the house by a side door. They noticed that Mrs. Leeds' car no longer stood on the driveway and took it for granted that she and her daughter had driven to Andover as was their daily custom.

They glanced casually into the library and noticed that it was empty. However, Penny's keen eyes traveled to the desk. She observed that the ink bottle had been left uncorked and that a pen had been removed from its holder.

"I wonder what Mrs. Leeds and Laponi were up to?" she speculated. "Oh, well, I'll probably find out soon enough."

"I believe I'll go upstairs for a few minutes," Rosanna excused herself. "I haven't straightened my things yet this morning."

Left alone, Penny crossed over to the desk and examined the paper in the wastebasket. She looked closely at the blotter, even holding it to the mirror, but it had been used so many times that the words which appeared upon it could not be read. There was not a scrap of

evidence to show what Mrs. Leeds and Max Laponi had been writing.

In disappointment Penny picked up a book and sat down to read. Presently she heard soft steps in the hallway but paid slight attention thinking that it was Rosanna.

She was on the verge of calling her friend's name when she thought better of it. The sound of the footsteps told her that the person had gone into the living room. And by this time she was convinced that it was not Rosanna.

She waited, listening. She heard a faint metallic click which caused her to lay aside her book and quietly steal to the doorway of the living room.

Max Laponi stood with his back toward her, so absorbed in what he was about that he had not the slightest suspicion that he was being observed.

Penny saw him carefully remove the oil painting from the wall. He deftly opened the panel, exposing the safe. Then, with a sureness of touch which amazed Penny, he began to spin the dials.

CHAPTER XIV

A Diamond Ring

"MR. LAPONI, kindly move away from that safe!"

Penny spoke sharply as she quietly stepped into the living room. The man whirled and saw her. Taken by surprise, his hand fell away from the dials and he looked confused.

"You seem to be very much interested in Mr. Winters' valuables," Penny said sternly.

By this time Max Laponi had recovered his composure.

"Why shouldn't I be?" he retorted. "After all, I am Mr. Winters' heir."

"That remains to be seen, Mr. Laponi. You appear to be very handy at opening safes, I notice." Penny crossed the room and after turning the handle to make certain that Laponi had not succeeded in his purpose, closed the panel and returned the oil painting to its former position.

"I suppose you think I was trying to steal," Laponi began after a minute of dead silence. "Nothing was further from my intention."

"No?"

"Ever since I caught Caleb Eckert trying to break into this safe I've been worried. Last night I saw him prowling around the house after dark and it made me uneasy. I was afraid he would make another attempt to steal Mr. Winters' valuables."

"So you thought you would just beat him to it!" Penny retorted sarcastically.

"Certainly not. When you entered the room I was merely inspecting the safe to make certain that it was securely locked."

Penny could not refrain from smiling. She did not believe a word of what Max Laponi was telling her.

"That safe seems to be the real attraction of this house," she remarked. "I've suspected for some time that it contains Mr. Winters' ivory collection."

If Max Laponi were taken aback he did not disclose it. But he eyed Penny shrewdly.

"You're a smart little girl. Too smart to go around making trouble for yourself. Now if you're wise you'll team up with me and I'll promise you that you'll come out at the top of the heap."

"Just what is your proposition?" Penny asked quickly.

Max Laponi was too alert to place himself in any trap.

"If you're willing to follow my orders I'll promise you that when I come into my fortune you'll be well paid."

"And what are your orders?"

"I'll tell you after you give me your promise."

Penny regarded him coldly.

"I'll promise nothing, Mr. Laponi, except that I intend to see justice done to Rosanna Winters! You and Mrs. Leeds are trying to cheat her out of her rightful inheritance."

"She'll never get a cent. If you had an ounce of sense you'd ditch her and come in with us. It's all fixed—"

"Fixed!" Penny tripped him. "And by 'us' I imagine you mean Mrs. Leeds. You're both

hatching some scheme to defraud Rosanna."

Laponi smiled impudently.

"Well, don't say I didn't give you your choice, Miss Nichols. It is your decision to have no share in the spoils?"

"It is."

Laponi's face darkened slightly. "As you wish, Miss Nichols. But let me give you a little warning. Keep your nose out of my affairs or it will be the worse for you!"

He turned and walked from the room. A minute later Penny saw him leave the house by the side door.

"If he thinks he can frighten me with a threat he has another guess coming!" she thought indignantly. "For two cents I'd call in the police."

Upon second consideration she decided that such a move would not be wise. After all she had no real evidence against Laponi. While she was convinced in her own mind that his motives were dishonest the police might take a more conservative attitude. Then too, she would be forced to offer a satisfactory explanation for her own presence in the house.

"Laponi is after something more valuable than a will," Penny mused as she stood at the window watching his car vanish down the driveway.

Her eye wandered to the oil painting on the wall. She felt certain that the safe which was screened beneath it guarded Mr. Winters' collection of ivory. And from the expression of Laponi's face when she had mentioned her belief, she was sure that he shared the same conviction.

"He practically admitted he was involved in some scheme to defraud Rosanna," she thought. "I can't help feeling he's a crook even if he is a relative of Mr. Winters. I wish I dared search his room for evidence!"

The more she considered the idea, the greater became its appeal. Probably Laponi would not return to the house for at least an hour. She would have ample time. Still, the undertaking would be a risky one and not at all to her liking.

"I suppose a professional detective wouldn't feel squeamish about entering another person's

room if the case demanded it," she encouraged herself. "Laponi practically admitted his guilt —that was because he thought I couldn't do anything about it. Maybe I'll show him!"

By this time Penny's mind was made up. Quietly she stole up the stairway. In the upper corridor she paused to listen for a minute. Everything was still.

Penny tiptoed down the hall to Max Laponi's room. She tried the door. It was locked.

"That's funny," she thought. "He must keep something inside that he's afraid to have folks see."

She was more eager than before to search the room. But with the key gone it seemed out of the question. Then Penny's face lighted as she recalled the empty bedroom adjoining the one occupied by Laponi. It was possible that they might have a connecting door.

Looking carefully about to make certain that she was not under observation, she moved on down the hall and tried the next door. To her delight it opened. She entered the dusty chamber, gazing quickly about. She was dis-

appointed to see that the two bedrooms had no connecting door.

However, when she walked to the window and raised it, she noted a wide ledge which ran the length of the building.

"If only I dared lower myself to it I could reach Max Laponi's room, for the ledge is only a few feet below from his window!" she reasoned.

Penny decided that the chance was worth taking. She naturally was athletic and had confidence that she could maintain a foothold. Lowering herself to the ledge she flattened herself to the wall of the house and moved an inch at a time toward the next window.

It was a long fall to the ground. Penny did not dare glance downward. Although the distance between the two windows was not more than twelve feet it seemed an age until her hands clutched the sill.

As she pried at the window a sudden fear assailed her. What if it too were locked?

The window had only stuck a little. A quick jerk brought it up. By sheer strength of muscle,

Penny raised herself to the level of the sill, swinging her feet through the opening.

"I must work fast," she told herself, glancing appraisingly about. "I'd not care to be caught here."

Her attention was drawn to Max Laponi's open suitcase which had been left carelessly on the bed. Crossing over to it she began to explore the contents systematically.

"My hunch about Laponi may have been wrong," she thought uncomfortably as the search revealed nothing of interest.

Just then her hand touched something hard and cold. Penny knew instantly that it was a revolver. She was not afraid of firearms for her father had taught her to shoot. Carefully she inspected the weapon.

"All this heavy artillery must have been brought here for a purpose," she reflected grimly. "It's clear Laponi is out to get what he wants by one means or another."

After an instant's hesitation Penny placed the revolver on the table. She had decided to take it with her when she left.

"Things in this house are fast approaching a crisis," she reasoned. "Before I get through I may need that weapon myself."

Save for an inner pocket in the suitcase, Penny had completed her inspection. She ran her hand into the cloth pouch and brought to light several papers. Rapidly she went through them.

Suddenly she uttered a cry of delight. She had discovered the letter which Max Laponi claimed had been sent him by the same lawyer who had notified Rosanna of her newly inherited fortune.

Although Laponi, upon his arrival at Raven Ridge, had flourished the document, he had permitted no one to inspect it closely.

Now as Penny read the letter carefully she recalled that the wording was identical with the message which Rosanna had received. Closely she studied the salutation, holding the paper to the light.

"I believe the name has been changed!" she exclaimed. "Max Laponi has cleverly removed Rosanna's name and substituted his own. This must be the letter which Rosanna lost!"

It occurred to her that the man doubtlessly had found the missing key as well. She again ran her hand into the cloth pocket and triumphantly brought it forth.

"He's nothing but a rank impostor!" she told herself. "I'll keep this letter as evidence against him and the key will come in handy too!"

Penny hastily rearranged the suitcase as she had found it and prepared to depart. The search had well repaid her for her efforts, but it had taken longer than she had intended.

However, as she crossed the room toward the window she noticed a number of small objects spread out over the dresser and could not resist pausing to inspect them. They held her interest only briefly.

She turned away again but as she moved off a button on her sleeve caught in the lace work of the runner which covered the dresser top. It pulled awry and Penny paused to straighten it.

As she rearranged the piece, her fingers touched a small hard object on the under side. Her curiosity aroused she turned back the runner and looked beneath it.

There lay a diamond ring.

"A diamond!" she exclaimed. "As big as a house too. It's evidently been hidden here by Max Laponi!"

She picked it up and examined it, reflecting that somewhere she had seen a similar piece of jewelry. She was certain the diamond was not an imitation for it sparkled brightly. However, she had no opportunity to give it more than a hasty glance for she was startled to hear footsteps coming down the hall.

"Max Laponi may be coming back," she thought nervously.

Leaving the diamond ring where she had discovered it she hastily rearranged the dresser cover. With her newly acquired evidence, she darted to the window and lowered herself to the outside ledge.

CHAPTER XV

Penny's Evidence

THE bedroom door opened and Max Laponi entered.

Penny Nichols had lowered herself to the narrow ledge not an instant too soon. There had been no time to pull the window down after her.

As she heard the man walk across the room she huddled fearfully against the wall, feeling certain that he would notice the open window immediately. Her position was a precarious one. She dared not move lest even a slight sound betray her to the man inside. On the other hand, it was doubtful how long she could remain where she was without losing her footing. She knew that if she once glanced downward her courage would fail her.

Penny could hear Laponi muttering to himself.

"I thought I left that window down," she

heard him say. "If anyone has been in here—"

He crossed to the bed and ran his hand under the pillow. Penny peeped through the window just as he removed a shiny object.

"Another revolver!" she gasped. "That's one I missed."

The sight of the weapon seemed to reassure Laponi for he appeared relieved. He next crossed over to the bureau and searched for the diamond ring. Penny was very glad that she had not touched it.

"I guess everything is the same as I left it," the man muttered to himself. "Still, I'd have sworn I left that window down."

As Penny huddled flat against the wall, he moved over toward it. She held her breath, waiting. Would he look out? If he did, then all was lost.

Laponi stood for some minutes at the open window, seemingly absorbed in his thoughts. Then he abruptly slammed it down and turned away.

"That was a narrow escape!" Penny congratulated herself. "If I ever get out of this mess I'll

take care not to get myself into another position like it!"

She cautiously crept along the ledge until at last she was able to stretch out her hand and grasp the sill of the next window. After pulling herself through she quietly closed it behind her. Then she tiptoed to the bedroom door and looked out. No one was in sight.

Carefully secreting the articles which she had taken from Laponi's room, she darted past his door and safely on to the bedroom which she shared with Rosanna. The latter arose as she burst in upon her.

"How you startled me, Penny."

She was due for another shock as Penny dropped the revolver upon the dresser.

"Penny, where did you get that thing?" she demanded nervously.

"Not so loud or someone may hear you," Penny warned. "It came from Laponi's room, and that's not all I found either."

She drew forth the letter and the missing key. Rosanna stared incredulously.

"Surely they can't be mine, Penny."

"I suspect they are. Take a look at this letter and tell me if you notice anything wrong."

Rosanna studied the letter briefly, then shook her head.

"It reads just like the one I received."

"That's the point. Notice the name at the top."

"Why, it looks as if it might have been changed!" Rosanna cried.

"And I think it has been. It's my opinion that Max Laponi found your letter and the missing key. He's a rank impostor."

"Then you believe he is the one who has been frightening the household by playing on the pipe organ?"

"I haven't made up my mind about that yet," Penny returned thoughtfully. "But one thing I'm certain about. Laponi is a dangerous man."

"Let's get away from here right away."

Penny laughed shortly. "I should say not! This mystery is growing more exciting every minute. I mean to discover Max Laponi's little game!"

"But he may harm us," Rosanna protested.

"Especially if he suspects you've searched his room."

"Laponi is armed," Penny admitted with a frown. "But for that matter so are we."

"You wouldn't dare to carry that revolver!"

"I most certainly would. Not that I'd care to use it, but it might serve as protection."

"It seems to me we should call in the police."

Penny shook her head. "Not yet. But I do intend to wire my father. I'm going to ask him to learn all he can about Laponi. It may turn out that the man has a prison record."

"You suspect that because you found the revolver in his room?"

"Well, honest citizens don't carry weapons without permits."

"You're thinking of doing it," Rosanna challenged.

Penny laughed. "This is an extra special emergency. But I have another reason for believing that Laponi is a crook. I suspect he has a stolen ring in his possession."

She then told of finding the diamond ring under the dresser scarf.

"All diamonds look somewhat alike," she acknowledged, "but I'm sure I've seen that ring before."

"Where?"

"In Bresham's Department Store. I think it's the same ring that was stolen the afternoon I met you there."

"Laponi does bear a slight resemblance to the shoplifter," Rosanna admitted thoughtfully. "Only the store thief was a much older man."

"Disguised perhaps. Oh, I may be wrong, but at least it will do no harm to have Father look into the matter."

"When he gets your wire, Penny, he'll probably be so alarmed that he'll send word for you to start back to Mt. Ashland at once."

"Not Dad. He'd rather catch a crook than eat. I'm sure he'll help me."

"When will you send the wire?"

"Right away. I'd like to leave the house before Laponi sees me."

However, as the girls stepped out into the hall a few minutes later they heard loud voices coming up from the living room. Penny in-

stantly recognized Laponi's sharp tones and paused at the top of the stairs to peer down.

"It's Max and Caleb Eckert," she reported in a whisper. "My, what a quarrel they're having!"

The girls listened for a minute but the voices of the two men died to a low murmur and they could distinguish only an occasional word.

"Unless you want Laponi to see you we'd better slip down the back way," Rosanna suggested.

Using the rear stairs the girls were able to leave the house without being observed. They drove directly to Andover where Penny dispatched a lengthy wire to her father. She requested him to learn all he could concerning Max Laponi and if possible to send her a complete description of the diamond ring which had been stolen from the department store.

"I wonder why Caleb and Max Laponi were going at each other in such dreadful fashion?" Rosanna mused as they drove back toward the Winters' mansion.

Penny had been pondering over the same question.

"I suppose Caleb may be suspicious of him," Rosanna went on when Penny did not answer.

"Possibly. Old Caleb hasn't acted too honestly himself, Rosanna."

"I know he hasn't. He doesn't like to answer questions and his interest in Mr. Winters' safe is rather puzzling. It seems to me that everyone at Raven Ridge acts queerly."

"Including me?" Penny teased.

Rosanna laughed and squeezed her arm affectionately. "Of course I don't mean you. You've been wonderful and I'll never never be able to repay you for all you've done."

"Nonsense, so far I've accomplished exactly nothing. But I have a feeling that before another twenty-four hours elapse things are going to start breaking for us."

"I hope so," Rosanna sighed.

Neither Max Laponi nor Caleb Eckert were in the living room when the girls returned to the house. Alicia was reading a book by the

fireplace but at sight of Penny and Rosanna she coldly withdrew.

"I'm glad she's gone," Penny smiled. "It clears the atmosphere."

"Must we stay here tonight?" Rosanna asked. "Couldn't we go to a hotel and come back in the morning? Since I know that Max Laponi——"

She broke off as Penny shot her a warning glance.

"Even the walls seem to have ears in this house, Rosanna. Come outside and we'll do our planning there."

They went out into the yard and sat down on a stone bench.

"I know I'm a dreadful coward," Rosanna acknowledged. "Only I'm so afraid something terrible is about to happen."

"Now don't let your nerves get the best of you," Penny advised kindly. "I shouldn't have shown you that revolver I found in Laponi's room. You haven't been the same since."

"It wasn't just the revolver. It's everything."

Penny was silent for a moment. Then she said quietly:

"I don't blame you for feeling the way you do. Perhaps we are taking a chance to remain here tonight. I shouldn't do it only I feel that it will give me an opportunity to clear up the mystery."

"But if you suspect Max——"

"I do suspect him of a great many things, but I'm not certain of his game yet, Rosanna. Besides, I must have absolute proof before I dare notify the police. Tonight I intend to watch the mouth of the tunnel."

"I can't permit you to do it by yourself. If you insist on taking such a chance I'll go with you!"

Penny remonstrated but at length it was agreed that shortly after nightfall the two would steal down to the lake's edge and lie in wait at the mouth of the tunnel for the mysterious ghost to appear.

For a long time the two girls sat staring out across the lake, each absorbed with her own thoughts. What would the night bring forth?

"I believe I'll walk down to Caleb Eckert's cabin and chat with him for a few minutes,"

Penny remarked a little later as her companion arose from the bench. "Want to come along?"

"No, I think I'll go inside. The air is growing chilly and my sweater is upstairs."

"I'll be glad to wait for you."

"If you don't mind, I believe I'll just rest. You go on alone."

"You really don't mind?"

"Of course not. But I doubt if you'll find Caleb at home. He usually goes fishing about this time of day."

"Well, I may as well see anyhow. I want to ask him about that picture of Jacob Winters. I intend to keep annoying him until he gives me a satisfactory answer."

As Rosanna returned to the house, Penny walked swiftly in the direction of the cabin.

"I'm only wasting my time," she thought. "Caleb has no intention of ever producing that photograph."

Penny rapped on the door, noticing that it was partly ajar. There was no response. She knocked a second time.

Far out on the lake she could see a small row-

boat with one lone fisherman. No doubt it was Caleb, she decided.

She started away from the cabin, then abruptly halted as she was struck with a sudden thought. With Caleb out on the lake she would have an excellent opportunity to search his shack for the photograph of Jacob Winters. She felt convinced she would find it there.

"Entering people's private quarters seems to be a bad habit of mine," she chuckled. "Still, it's all in a good cause."

Penny surveyed the lake again. The rowboat was nearly out of sight.

After a moment of indecision, she pushed open the cabin door and entered. Caleb had left everything in a clutter and she scarcely knew where to begin her search.

She looked in the desk and in several table drawers. She searched in the magazine rack and even in the kitchen cupboard. She was growing discouraged when she finally opened a closet and peered up at the high shelves. Far above her head was a stack of old papers.

Although Penny had given up hope of find-

ing the picture, she brought a chair and climbing up on it, took down the papers.

As she lifted the stack, an object which had been lying on the shelf was brushed to the floor. She bent down to pick it up. To her amazement and delight it was a photograph.

She stared in disbelief at the man's face and then turned the photo over to read what had been written on the back.

"Jacob Winters."

"And Caleb told me he didn't know where he could get a photograph!" Penny thought indignantly. "All the time he had this one hidden here on the shelf. Why, I'm positive this picture came out of the album Rosanna and I found. Very likely Caleb tore it out himself!"

Hastily replacing the papers on the shelf, Penny tucked the photograph into her pocket and prepared to leave the cabin. She was highly elated over her discovery.

"This will prove quite a valuable addition to my collection of evidence," she chuckled. "No wonder Caleb was afraid to have me see it."

CHAPTER XVI

Mrs. Leeds' Strategy

PENNY was highly jubilant as she walked rapidly toward the house on the hill. The day had been an unusually successful one for her and with the photograph of Jacob Winters in her possession she felt that it would only be a matter of time until the mystery was solved.

"But I must act quickly or it may be too late," she thought.

Drawing near the house she saw Rosanna hurrying to meet her. Penny quickened her step as she observed that the girl appeared greatly agitated.

"Oh, Penny," Rosanna gasped, "Mrs. Leeds has locked me out of the house!"

"What?"

"When I tried to get in after leaving you a few minutes ago she met me at the front door. She said I couldn't come in because the house

and everything surrounding it belongs to her now."

Penny laughed shortly. "She's been saying that ever since she came here."

"I know, but this is different, Penny. She has the will to prove it."

"The will?"

"Yes, she showed it to me. And it's true. My uncle left all his property to her."

"And where did she claim to have found this document?" Penny asked.

"Why, somewhere in the house. I was so upset I didn't think to inquire. Now that I know Uncle Jacob left everything to her, I shall leave at once."

Penny caught Rosanna by the arm. "Don't be in too much of a hurry to get away," she advised. "It may be that Mrs. Leeds' claims are false."

"But I saw the will for myself."

"Perhaps it was forged."

"I never thought of that," Rosanna gasped. "Do you think she would resort to such a trick?"

"I believe she'd do almost anything to gain a fortune."

Penny had been thinking swiftly. She recalled the secretive actions of Mrs. Leeds and Max Laponi when they were closeted together in the library. They had been engrossed in writing a document of some sort. Doubtless it was the will which Mrs. Leeds now claimed to have found.

Penny's face puckered into a worried frown. Mrs. Leeds' unexpected action might complicate the entire situation and ruin her own plans. She feared too that the woman actually had destroyed Jacob Winters' true will.

"She was burning it in the fireplace that day when I came upon her," Penny thought. "That's why she feels so safe about forging another one in her own favor."

"What were you saying?" Rosanna inquired.

Penny had not realized that she was speaking aloud.

"Only thinking," she responded. "We'll go in and talk with Mrs. Leeds."

"But we can't get in for she has locked all the

doors. Our luggage is sitting out on the porch."

"Very considerate of her I must say," Penny grinned. "But we can get in all right." She produced the key which she had found in Max Laponi's room.

"Weren't you smart to keep it!" Rosanna cried.

"That remains to be seen. But come on, let's beard Mrs. Leeds in her den."

Penny boldly walked up to the front door. It was locked as Rosanna had said, so inserting her key she opened it.

As the girls entered, they heard Alicia calling shrilly to her mother and an instant later Mrs. Leeds came storming into the hall.

"What is the meaning of this outrage?" she demanded furiously.

"That is what we should like to know," Penny retorted. "Why did you lock us out?"

"Because this is my house. Jacob Winters left everything to me and I have the will to prove it."

"May I ask where you found it?" Penny inquired.

The question confused Mrs. Leeds. She began to stammer.

"Why, I—that is, it's none of your affair, Miss Nichols!"

"I disagree with you there. I am interested in seeing Rosanna treated fairly. May I examine the will?"

Mrs. Leeds hesitated and the girls thought that she would refuse the request. However, the woman said:

"I will permit you to read it if you promise not to destroy it."

"Destroying wills isn't in my line," Penny returned pointedly.

Mrs. Leeds tossed her head angrily. An expression of bitter hatred which she made no attempt to hide, came into her eyes. She went to the living room desk and from a pigeon hole removed a document which she offered Penny.

"There, read it for yourself."

Penny inspected the will briefly. Since neither she nor Rosanna had ever seen Jacob Winters' handwriting it was impossible to tell if the document had been forged.

To Rosanna's astonishment, she suddenly seemed to experience a change of attitude regarding Mrs. Leeds' claim to the property.

"I may have made a mistake," Penny acknowledged. "This paper seems to give everything to you, Mrs. Leeds."

"I am glad you are coming to your senses at last, Miss Nichols."

"I suppose Rosanna and I may as well take our things and leave," she went on.

"Your luggage is ready," the woman said with satisfaction. "Alicia and I packed for you."

"Very thoughtful," Penny murmured ironically. "However, I think I'll just run upstairs and see if anything was missed."

"Why, yes, you may do that if you like." Now that she was assured of victory, Mrs. Leeds felt that she could afford to make slight concessions.

No sooner had the bedroom door closed behind the two girls than Rosanna faced Penny with a puzzled look.

"Did you really think the will was genuine, Penny?"

"No, of course not, but I decided that prob-

ably we could gain our ends best by appearing to give in to Mrs. Leeds."

As she spoke, Penny ran her hand under the pillow of the bed and brought forth the revolver which she had taken from Max Laponi's room.

"Penny, what do you intend to do with that weapon?" Rosanna demanded anxiously.

"Don't worry, I'm not planning on committing any murders. But it may come in handy tonight."

"You just told Mrs. Leeds that we would leave the house immediately," Rosanna reminded her in bewilderment.

"I know, but that doesn't mean we'll leave the grounds. We'll appear to go away, but after dark we'll sneak back to the entrance of the tunnel."

"To watch for the ghost?"

"Yes, that's my plan. You'll not be afraid to go with me, will you?"

"No," Rosanna returned quietly. "Only I can't see what good it will do now. Mrs. Leeds definitely has the property and anything we

learn about the ghost can't alter the situation."

"I'm not so sure of that," Penny smiled.

She was so jubilant as they prepared to take their luggage and leave the house that Mrs. Leeds regarded her slightly with suspicion. However, the woman was reassured to see the girls drive away in their car.

Rosanna and Penny dined early at Andover but the former ate little. Although she made every effort to carry on a cheerful conversation it was obvious to her companion that she was completely discouraged.

"Cheer up," Penny advised optimistically. "I tell you everything will come out right yet. Even if my own plan fails, there are still lawyers to be hired. Mrs. Leeds can't take over the property legally until the court approves."

"She'll have things fixed up her way," Rosanna maintained gloomily. "I'll have no money to hire a lawyer. I must try to find myself a job."

"Father will help you get one if you need it."

"I've accepted so many favors from you already," Rosanna protested.

"You have not!" Penny cut in. "This trip to Raven Ridge has been sheer fun for me. And unless I'm mistaken tonight will prove the most exciting of all."

"I'm afraid so," Rosanna shuddered.

She glanced curiously at her companion. She could not understand Penny's eagerness to return to the mouth of the tunnel. In her own opinion the mysterious ghost was none other than Max Laponi and she had no desire to encounter him again.

"Do you still want to go through with the plan?" she inquired doubtfully.

"I certainly do. I'd never feel satisfied if I left Raven Ridge without solving the mystery. It's about time we start for the tunnel too."

They left the restaurant, returning to Penny's car which had been parked outside.

"Probably our friend the ghost won't put in an appearance much before midnight," Penny remarked as they drove slowly toward Raven Ridge, "but it will be wise I think to allow ourselves plenty of time to find a good hiding place."

It had grown dark and the girls were pleased

to note that heavy clouds would hide the moon and stars.

Some distance from the Winters' house they parked in a dense thicket near the road. Before alighting, Penny removed a small package from the side pocket of the car.

"What's that?" Rosanna asked curiously.

"Dynamite," Penny chuckled.

"Dynamite!"

"In the form of evidence. Unless I'm mistaken, this little package will produce some startling results!"

"You're talking in absolute riddles."

"Just be patient and you'll soon know what I mean," Penny declared teasingly. "I'd tell you now only it would ruin the surprise."

She locked the automobile and afoot they quietly stole down a steep winding trail which led to the entrance of the old mine.

CHAPTER XVII

The Man in the Boat

PENNY and Rosanna approached the mine entrance cautiously, fearing that someone in the vicinity might observe their movements. However, the place seemed deserted.

"The rowboat is gone," Penny commented as she pulled aside a clump of bushes to survey the spot where it had been hidden.

"Why, it is! Perhaps the ghost has come and left."

"I certainly hope not. That would ruin everything. Anyway, we'll wait and see. It's early yet."

After investigating the shore line thoroughly, they found an excellent hiding place in a dense thicket not far from the entrance to the mine. Then they settled themselves to wait.

"What time is it?" Rosanna yawned.

"Only a little after nine. We'll have a long siege of it."

The night was cold and damp. Although both girls had worn sweaters they soon grew uncomfortable and huddled close together for warmth. Rosanna tried not to show her nervousness but even the screech of an owl startled her. She was aware of every sound and any unusual movement caused her to grow tense.

"You'll be a wreck long before midnight," Penny declared. "We're armed and there's nothing to fear."

Rosanna made a supreme effort to relax but it was not until several hours had elapsed that she began to grow accustomed to her surroundings. Penny, on the other hand, found it difficult to remain awake.

At first she riveted her attention upon the lake but as there was no evidence of a boat, soon lost interest. For a time she watched the twinkling lights at Raven Ridge but one by one they disappeared until the old mansion on the hill was cloaked in darkness.

"Now that the household has gone to bed our ghost should be starting in on his night's work," she remarked hopefully to Rosanna.

Another half hour dragged by. Still no one came. Even Rosanna found it increasingly difficult to fight off drowsiness.

"I don't believe the ghost is coming tonight," she declared.

"It begins to look that way. But perhaps it's still too early. Surely it can't be any more than midnight."

"It seems later than that," Rosanna sighed. "My back is nearly broken."

A few minutes later, from far over the hills, the girls heard the faint chiming of a town clock. They counted twelve strokes.

Minutes passed and still there was no sign of any visitor. At length, Penny arose to stretch her cramped limbs.

"I thought I heard something just then!" Rosanna whispered tensely.

Penny stood listening.

"You're right. I can hear oars dipping in and out of the water. It must be a boat coming this way."

Peering out through the bushes, the girls surveyed the lake. It was too dark to distinguish

objects but they distinctly could hear the rhythmical splash made by the moving oars.

"See anything?" Penny demanded.

"Not yet—oh, yes, now I do. It *is* a boat, Penny."

"And it's heading right for this spot! Let's creep a little closer to the opening of the tunnel."

Stealthily they changed positions but remained well hidden by a screen of bushes.

The boat by this time had drawn into the tiny cove. However, the night was so dark that neither of the girls was able to distinguish the features of the man who crouched in the stern.

He beached the boat and carefully drew it up into the bushes. Next he lighted a lantern, but his back was toward the girls and they did not see his face.

"Who can it be?" Rosanna whispered.

Penny gripped her companion's hand as a warning to remain silent.

The man with the lantern looked quickly about and then moved swiftly into the mouth of the tunnel.

"We must follow him," Penny urged.

They waited a minute, then noiselessly stole from their hiding place. As they peered into the dark mine tunnel they could see a moving light far ahead.

Fearing that they might lose sight of the man, the girls hastened their steps. They did not walk as quietly as they imagined, for soon the man ahead paused.

With one accord Penny and Rosanna froze against the tunnel wall.

As the man turned to look back, the light from the lantern shone full upon his face.

It was Caleb Eckert.

Rosanna and Penny remained flat against the wall scarcely daring to breathe. Would they be seen?

Apparently satisfied that no one was behind him in the tunnel, Caleb turned and walked slowly on.

"That was a narrow escape," Penny whispered. "He nearly saw us."

Rosanna was a trifle shaken. She had not expected to see Caleb Eckert.

"I suspected it several days ago but I wasn't absolutely certain," Penny told her.

"But what purpose can he have in playing such pranks?" Rosanna asked in bewilderment. "Caleb seemed rather nice even if he was gruff and outspoken. I never dreamed he'd resort to anything like this."

"Don't take it so hard," Penny advised. "He may have a reason for what he is doing."

The light had disappeared. The girls hurriedly moved on, fearing that they might lose sight of the old man entirely. With nothing to guide them it was difficult to find their way.

"It's lucky we explored in the daytime or we'd have trouble following," Rosanna declared. "The ground is so rough."

Even as she spoke she stubbed her toe on a rock and would have fallen had not Penny caught her by the arm.

They came presently to the first flight of stairs and were relieved to glimpse the lantern far above them. Taking care to keep out of range of the beam, they followed through the narrower passage to the second flight of steps.

By this time the girls were positive that Caleb intended to enter the house by means of the secret panel. At the risk of detection they drew a little closer.

Caleb paused at the head of the stairs to listen for a moment. Then he blew out his lantern.

Sensing that the old man would unlock the panel, Penny stole forward. She was just in time to see a section of the wall drop down. Caleb passed through the opening and with a click the panel closed behind him.

"Now what shall we do?" Rosanna demanded. "We're locked in here the same as we were before."

"I think I saw the place where he pressed the wall," Penny whispered. "I was watching closely."

For several minutes she groped about in the dark. At last her fingers touched a small knob.

"I believe I've found it," she proclaimed triumphantly.

As she was on the verge of turning the knob, she stayed her hand. With Caleb in the organ room he would be certain to see the panel open.

There was danger too that he might return at any instant to find them crouching at the head of the stairs.

"Shouldn't we turn back?" Rosanna whispered nervously.

"Let's wait until he begins to play the organ."

They listened expectantly. Minutes passed but not a strain of music did they hear.

"That's queer," Penny murmured. "I'm sure Caleb is the one who has been disturbing the household with his ghost music. Why doesn't he play as he's always done before?"

They both knew that the wall was not soundproof. For that matter they could hear old Caleb walking about in the room.

"He must be up to new tricks tonight," Penny whispered.

"He'll be coming back here any minute. Let's get away before he catches us."

Penny was reluctant to leave, for it struck her that Caleb Eckert had come to the Winters' house for a different purpose than that of his usual nightly visit. She was curious to learn what it was.

"Listen!" she warned, as they heard a strange noise from within.

"It sounded like a door closing," Rosanna declared.

"That's exactly what I think it was. Caleb must have gone out of the room. We'll be safe in entering now."

To make certain she listened for a few minutes but there was no sound of movement from within. Convinced that the coast was clear, she groped about for the knob which opened the panel.

It turned in her hand. She heard a sharp metallic click, and almost before she was prepared for it, the panel swung open. It closed again before either of the girls could recover from their surprise.

However, Penny turned the knob a second time and as the section of wall swung back, both girls stepped through into the room.

As they had expected, it was deserted.

"Where do you suppose he went?" Rosanna murmured.

They tiptoed to the outside door and softly

opened it. The hall was dark. At first they could distinguish nothing. Then Penny noticed that the door opening upon the second floor corridor was ajar.

"He went downstairs," she whispered. "Let's find out what he's up to."

The stairs creaked alarmingly as they crept down to the second floor. On the landing they hesitated an instant and were relieved to hear no unusual sound.

They peered into the long corridor and saw that it was empty. Caleb was nowhere to be seen.

"Perhaps he brought another bat for Mrs. Leeds' room," Rosanna suggested, glancing toward the chamber which the woman shared with her daughter.

The door, however, was tightly closed. The one at the other end of the hall which opened into Max Laponi's room was slightly ajar. Rosanna and Penny failed to notice.

Somewhere on the lower floor a board creaked. The two girls moved noiselessly to the stairway and looked down over the banister.

Even Penny was unprepared for the sight which greeted her eyes. Caleb Eckert was working at the dials of the living room safe!

CHAPTER XVIII

A Daring Theft

OLD Caleb had relighted his lantern and in its dim yellow glow the girls could make out every detail of the center hall and living room. In astonishment they watched the man spin the tiny dials of the safe. He manipulated them with a speed and skill which was amazing.

"Why, I do believe the scoundrel intends to steal Mr. Winters' valuables," Rosanna whispered with growing anger. "We can't let him do that."

With one accord they tiptoed down the long spiral stairway to the center hall. For a minute they were exposed to view but Caleb was so absorbed in what he was doing that he did not even glance up.

Hiding behind a heavy velvet curtain which partially screened the arched door of the living room, the girls watched.

Twice Caleb tried without success to open the safe. Although his movements were deft and sure it was obvious that he had made some slight mistake in the combination. Each time he failed he grew more impatient. They could see his hand shake.

"Drat it all!" they heard him mutter to himself. "That's the right combination. It ought to open."

At length the old man's efforts were rewarded. As he manipulated the dials for the third time there was a significant click from within the safe.

Chuckling to himself, Caleb turned the handle and swung open the steel door.

Save for a long metal box, the safe was empty. In the act of reaching for the container, Caleb suddenly wheeled.

The girls were startled at the action for they had heard nothing.

After looking searchingly about the room the old man apparently was satisfied that he was alone. With an uneasy laugh he again turned his attention to the safe.

"Guess I'm getting a mite jittery," he

muttered. "I was positive I heard someone behind me just then."

He thrust his hand into the safe and drew out the box. With fumbling fingers he unfastened the lid. A smile illuminated his wrinkled face as he regarded the contents.

"Still here, safe and sound. I was a little afraid—"

Without finishing, he lifted an object from the box and held it in the light. It was a tiny figure made of purest ivory.

Penny and Rosanna exchanged a swift glance. They knew now that the box contained Jacob Winters' priceless collection of ivory pieces!

After staring at the little figure for a minute Caleb carefully replaced it and closed the box. He then locked the safe and returned the oil painting to its former position on the wall.

"Stop him now or it will be too late," Rosanna whispered tensely.

Before Penny could act, there was a slight movement at the opposite end of the living room. The girls were horrified to see a closet door slowly open.

Caleb's back was turned. Oblivious of danger he bent down to pick up his lantern.

From within the closet a man was regarding Caleb with cold intensity. He held a revolver in his hand.

Rosanna, terrified at the sight, would have cried out a warning, had not Penny suddenly placed her hand over the girl's mouth.

Max Laponi, a cynical, cruel smile upon his angular face, stepped out into the living room, his revolver trained upon Caleb.

"Much obliged to you for opening the safe, Mr. Eckert," he said coolly. "You saved me the trouble."

Caleb wheeled and instinctively thrust the metal box behind his back. The gesture amused Laponi. He laughed harshly.

"I guess you weren't quite as clever as you thought you were, Caleb! Hand over the ivories and be quick about it."

"You're nothing but a crook!" the old man cried furiously.

"Hand over the ivories if you value your life."

Instead of obeying the order, Caleb slowly

retreated toward the door. Max Laponi's eyes narrowed dangerously.

"I don't want to shoot an old man but if you force me——"

"Don't shoot," Caleb quavered. "I'll give up the ivory."

"Good. Now you're acting sensibly. Drop the box on the table and raise your hands above your head."

Slowly, Caleb complied with the order.

Laponi moved with cat-like tread across the floor and snatched up the box. With his revolver still trained on the old man, he backed toward the door.

"Thank you for a very profitable evening," he smirked. "And when you locate your friend Mr. Winters——"

His words ended in a surprised gasp. Something had struck his right hand a stunning blow. The weapon fell from his bruised fingers, clattering to the floor. He felt a cold, hard object in the small of his back.

"It's your turn now," said Penny Nichols. "I'll trouble you to hand over the little box!"

CHAPTER XIX

The Tables Turn

MAX LAPONI whirled about and looked directly into the muzzle of Penny's revolver.

"Drop that box and put up your hands," she ordered crisply.

Laponi gazed at her jeeringly.

"The gun isn't loaded," he sneered.

"You should know," Penny retorted. "It's your own revolver. I took it from your room."

The expression of the crook's face altered for he well remembered that the weapon had been left in readiness for instant use.

While keeping Laponi covered, Penny kicked the other revolver across the floor in Caleb Eckert's direction. The old man hastily snatched it up.

Laponi knew then that he did not have a chance. With a shrug of his shoulders he admitted defeat. He dropped the metal box on

the table. Rosanna darted forward and snatched it up.

"I might have known you'd be the one to ruin things," Laponi said bitterly to Penny. "I was afraid of you from the first."

"Thank you for the compliment," Penny smiled. "Kindly keep your hands up, Mr. Laponi—if that's your true name."

"He's nothing but an impostor," Caleb Eckert broke in angrily. "I knew from the moment I set eyes on him that he was no relative of Jacob Winters."

"I can imagine that," Penny returned quietly. "But when explanations are in order, I think you'll need to clear up a few points yourself."

The old man looked confused. However, before he could answer, footsteps were heard on the stairs. Mrs. Leeds, wrapped in her bathrobe, came hurrying into the room. She had been disturbed by the sound of voices.

"Penny Nichols!" she cried furiously. "What are you doing in my house?"

Then she noticed the revolver and recoiled a step.

"What is the meaning of this?" she demanded. "Mr. Laponi, has this girl lost her senses?"

"Apparently, she has," the man sneered. "She claims I came here to steal that box while I was only trying to keep Caleb from making off with it."

"Release Mr. Laponi at once," Mrs. Leeds ordered haughtily. She glared at Caleb. "I always did distrust that man."

"Our dislike was mutual," Caleb retorted. "You are a grasping, selfish woman and your daughter is a chip of the old block!"

"How dare you!" Mrs. Leeds choked in fury. "Get out of this house, you meddlesome old man, or I'll have you arrested!"

Penny was actually enjoying the scene but now she decided to put an end to it.

"This little farce has gone far enough," she announced, turning to Caleb. "Tell them who you are, Mr. Eckert."

The old man nodded. Eyeing Mrs. Leeds with keen satisfaction, he exploded his bomb shell.

"I am Jacob Winters!"

Mrs. Leeds gasped in astonishment and even Max Laponi looked dazed. Of the entire group only Rosanna appeared pleased. Yet she too recalled that at times she had spoken wth embarrassing frankness to the old man.

"I don't believe it!" Mrs. Leeds snapped when she had recovered from the first shock. "It's another one of your trumped up stories."

"He has no proof," Max Laponi added.

"If he hasn't, I have," Penny interposed. She took the small package from her dress pocket, giving it to Rosanna to unwrap for her.

"Why, it's a photograph!" the girl exclaimed. "It's of you, Mr. Eckert, taken many years ago."

"Look on the back," Penny directed.

Rosanna turned the picture over and read the bold scrawl:

"Jacob Winters—on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday."

"That's all the proof I need," Rosanna cried, her eyes shining. "You are my uncle, aren't you, Mr. Eckert? This isn't another of your jokes?"

"No, it isn't a joke this time, Rosanna, al-

though for a time it looked as if the joke would be on me. And if it hadn't been for Penny Nichols this scoundrel certainly would have made off with my ivory collection."

"I didn't mean to pry into your private affairs," Penny apologized. "I shouldn't have taken the photograph only I suspected the truth and needed proof of it."

"It's just as well that you did take matters into your own hands. I guess I botched things up."

The little package of evidence which Penny had produced contained not only the photograph but the letter and key which she had found in Max Laponi's room.

Penny now directed attention to the signature appearing at the bottom of the letter.

"Compare it with the writing on the back of the photograph."

"They're identical," Rosanna declared.

"Then Caleb Eckert wrote those letters himself!" Mrs. Leeds cried furiously.

"Guilty," Caleb acknowledged with a grin.

"You ought to be arrested!" Mrs. Leeds fairly screamed. "It was a cruel joke to play. You

led us all to believe that we had inherited a fortune."

"Tell me, why did you write the letters?" Penny inquired. "That's one thing I've not been able to figure out although I think I might make an excellent guess."

Caleb sank down in the nearest chair.

"I may as well tell the entire story," he said. "Since my wife died some years ago I have been a very lonely man. I longed for an agreeable companion in my old age, someone who would enjoy traveling with me. My friends were few for I had spent most of my time abroad. My only living relatives were unknown to me. I felt ashamed because I had never looked them up."

"So you decided to become better acquainted," Penny prompted as Caleb hesitated.

"Yes, but I wanted to be liked for myself and not my fortune. I conceived the plan of sending out letters inviting my relatives here. I thought I would subject them to a series of tests and all the while I could be studying their characters."

"An insane plan!" Mrs. Leeds interposed.

"The idea didn't work the way I expected," Caleb continued ruefully. "I sent out four letters but two of them were returned unopened as the individuals to whom they were addressed were no longer living. However, as you know, three persons came to Raven Ridge claiming to have received one of the communications."

"Max Laponi must have found the letter and key which Rosanna lost," Penny declared. "He was the impostor."

"You have it all figured out very nicely," the crook sneered.

"I suspected right off that he was the one," Caleb went on with his story. "I knew I had no relative answering to his name."

"Why didn't you send him away at once?" Rosanna questioned.

"I couldn't very well do that without exposing my hand. If I admitted my identity then my little plan would be ruined."

"You were caught in an awkward position," Penny smiled.

"It kept getting worse all the time. I soon

suspected that Laponi was nothing less than a crook. When I discovered that he knew the ivory collection was in the house I decided to remove it from the safe."

"That was the day I came upon you when you were trying to open it," Penny recalled.

"Yes, but Laponi was prowling about the house and it was my bad luck that he happened in upon me at exactly the wrong time. Of course he guessed instantly that the ivories were locked in the safe.

"After that, I decided to get rid of him at any cost. I had a talk with him but even threats did no good."

"Why didn't you call in the police?" Penny asked. "Surely they would have provided you with protection."

"I thought I would make one more effort to get the ivories from the safe. Then if I failed I intended to admit my identity and send for help. I might have done it sooner only the police commissioner and I once had a little trouble—nothing serious. It was an argument over a tract of land. Still, I knew he'd enjoy

making me look ridiculous if ever he learned what I had done."

"Your pride very nearly cost you a fortune," Penny commented. She directed her gaze upon Max Laponi as she questioned: "How did you learn that Mr. Winters kept the ivory collection in this house?"

"That's for you to find out," the man jeered. "You'll have a hard time proving anything against me."

"This letter will be evidence enough," Penny retorted. "It's a plain case of forgery with intent to defraud. And then there's the matter of the will."

"The will wasn't forged," Mrs. Leeds cut in although Penny had not made such a claim.

"There never was a will," Caleb informed.

Mrs. Leeds stared at him. "What of the document I found in the drawer of the desk?" she demanded.

"You mean the one you discovered in the *locked* drawer," Caleb corrected with a chuckle. "The one that was made out in Rosanna's favor. That was just another of my little jokes. If you

had examined the will closely you would have noticed that the signature was never witnessed. It was a fake."

"That was the document which I saw you burn in the fireplace," Penny accused.

Mrs. Leeds flushed angrily. She realized that she had trapped herself.

"By the way, how do you explain the will made out in your favor?" Penny probed maliciously.

Mrs. Leeds turned her gaze upon Laponi for an instant. Then she said glibly:

"I found the will just as I said."

"You didn't find one made out in your favor," Caleb contradicted. "Because I never wrote such a document."

"Let's take a look at it," Penny suggested. "Where is the will, Mrs. Leeds?"

"I don't know what became of it. I misplaced it."

"You're afraid to produce it," Penny challenged.

Rosanna had been looking through the desk. She now triumphantly brought to light the

paper which Mrs. Leeds had claimed to be Jacob Winters' last will and testament.

"I never wrote a line of it," Caleb declared as he examined the document. "It's a forgery."

"Forgery is a serious offense, Mrs. Leeds," Penny remarked significantly.

"I didn't do it!" the woman cried nervously.

"I expect we'll have to send you to jail along with Laponi here," Caleb cackled.

Mrs. Leeds did not realize that he was only baiting her. She began to tremble with fright.

"Don't send me to jail," she pleaded. "I'll tell everything."

"Hold your tongue," Laponi cut in sharply.

Mrs. Leeds whirled upon him.

"You say that because you want me to take all the blame! Well, I won't do it. You forged that will yourself."

"At your suggestion, Mrs. Leeds."

"It wasn't my suggestion. I'd never have considered such a thing if you hadn't put the idea into my head."

"You burned the first will which you believed to be genuine."

"Perhaps I did. But I never forged anything in my life."

"That was because you were afraid you'd be caught," Laponi sneered. "You wanted someone else to take the rap for you."

"You tricked me," Mrs. Leeds accused. "If I had known you intended to rob Mr. Winters of his ivories I should have had nothing to do with you."

"I suppose you thought it wasn't robbery when you decided to cheat Rosanna Winters out of her inheritance?"

"She had no inheritance."

"But you thought she did. No, Mrs. Leeds you paid me well to forge the will in your favor. You're involved every bit as deeply as I."

Mrs. Leeds collapsed into a chair and burying her face in her hands began to sob.

Penny felt a little sorry for her, realizing that at heart the woman was not a criminal. She had been goaded on by an overpowering ambition to improve her social position by gaining Jacob Winters' fortune.

"We may as well call the police," Penny said

after a slight hesitation. She had noticed that Laponi was casting cunning glances about the room and guessed that he was hoping for an opportunity to escape.

Mrs. Leeds sprang to her feet. She darted over to Jacob Winters, grasping him by the arm.

"Oh, please, please don't have me arrested. I didn't mean to do wrong. For the sake of my daughter let me go free. After all, we are relatives."

"Unfortunately, we are," he agreed. Turning to Rosanna, he said quietly: "It is for you to decide, my dear."

"Let her go free," Rosanna urged instantly.

"I think that is best," he nodded. "But as far as Max Laponi is concerned we can't get him to the lock-up soon enough to please me."

"If you'll guard him I'll telephone for the police," Penny offered.

Leaving the old man with both revolvers she went into an adjoining room to place the call.

No sooner had she disappeared than Max Laponi saw his opportunity to escape. For an instant Jacob Winters' attention wavered.

That instant was enough for Laponi. Seizing the metal box which Rosanna had replaced upon the table, he darted out through the doorway.

CHAPTER XX

A Break for Freedom

MAX LAPONI bolted across the center hall, flinging open the outside door. He looked directly into the face of Christopher Nichols.

"Hello, what's the big hurry?" the detective demanded, grasping him firmly by the arm.

Laponi tried to jerk free but he was no match for the detective.

By this time Penny and the others had come streaming into the hall.

"Don't let him get away!" Penny cried.

As the crook struggled to escape, Mr. Nichols slipped a pair of handcuffs over the man's wrists. Recovering the metal box he handed it to his daughter.

"Dad, how did you get here?" she asked eagerly.

The detective did not hear for he was regarding Laponi with keen interest.

"Well, well, if it isn't my old friend Leo Corley. Or possibly you have a new alias by this time."

"He calls himself Max Laponi," Penny informed. "Is he a known criminal?"

"Very well known, Penny. He's wanted in three states for forgery, blackmail and robbery. His latest escapade was to steal a diamond ring from the Bresham Department Store."

"Then you did get my wire?" Penny cried.

"Yes, that's what brought me here. After I received it I got busy right off and with the information you furnished it was easy to look up this man's record. The police have been after him for months."

"You didn't waste any time coming here," Penny smiled.

"I was afraid you girls might be in more danger than you realized. Max here isn't such a nice companion. By the way what's in the box?"

Penny opened it to reveal Mr. Winters' fine collection of ivory. The detective whistled in awe.

"That would have been a nice haul, Max," he said. "Too bad we had to spoil your little game."

"If it hadn't been for that kid of yours I'd have gotten away with it," the crook growled. "I was dumb not to suspect she was the daughter of a detective."

"You may as well cough up the diamond ring," Mr. Nichols advised. "It will save an unpleasant search."

With a shrug of his shoulders, Laponi took the gem from an inner pocket and gave it to the detective.

"When do we start for the station?" he asked. "We may as well get going."

"I've already called the police," Penny told her father.

"Then we won't have long to wait." He shoved Laponi toward a chair. "May as well make yourself comfortable until the wagon gets here."

"Your kindness overwhelms me," the crook returned with exaggerated politeness.

"How did you get wind that Mr. Winters'

ivories were kept in the house?" the detective inquired curiously.

Although the crook had refused to answer the same questions a few minutes before he was now willing to talk, knowing that his last chance for escape had been cut off.

"I read an item in the paper some months ago," he confessed. "It was a little news story to the effect that Jacob Winters had recently purchased several new pieces for his collection and that he intended to build special exhibit cases in his house as a means of displaying them. I clipped the item and forgot about it.

"Then one day I chanced to pick up a letter which someone had dropped. It contained a key to this house. I decided it was too good an opportunity to miss. Posing as Jacob Winters' nephew I came here to look over the situation."

"I never had a nephew," Mr. Winters declared.

"That was the first mistake I made. The second was in underestimating the ability of Penny Nichols. I thought she was only a school girl."

Penny smiled broadly as she inquired: "Didn't you enter into an agreement with Mrs. Leeds to defraud Rosanna?"

"I forged the will for her if that's what you mean. I wasn't interested in getting any of the money myself."

"That was because you knew it couldn't be done," the detective interposed. "You considered the ivory collection more profitable."

"Of course you forged the letter stating that Jacob Winters had been buried at sea," Penny mentioned.

With a nod of his head, the man acknowledged the charge. It was Christopher Nichols' turn to ask a question. Penny's letters had mentioned the mysterious mansion ghost and he was deeply interested in the subject.

"I suppose you were the ghost, Max?"

Jacob Winters answered for him.

"I was the ghost. It was part of my joke to frighten the occupants of this house. Not a very good joke, I'll admit."

"And you were the one who put bats in my room," Mrs. Leeds accused.

"Yes, and a garter snake in your bed which you never found."

"Oh!"

"Of course, Mr. Eckert, your ghostly pranks included playing the organ," Penny smiled. "I suspected it when I learned Jacob Winters had been a talented musician."

"I built the pipe organ into the house before my wife died," Mr. Winters explained. "I haven't used it a great deal in recent years."

"You haven't told us about the tunnel," Rosanna reminded him. "How did you happen to construct it?"

"I didn't. The lower branch of the passage was an old mine tunnel. The mine closed down forty years or so ago. The upper passage which connects with the house was built by my grandfather. This house, you know, has been in the Winters' family for generations. And I hope, upon my death, that it will pass on to another by the same name."

He looked significantly at Rosanna as he spoke.

Before the conversation could be continued,

the police car drove up to the door. Max Laponi was loaded in and taken away. Mr. Nichols went with the police, promising to return to the Winters' house as soon as he could.

After the commotion had subsided, Jacob Winters turned severely to Mrs. Leeds.

"As for you, madam, kindly pack your things and leave this house at once. I never want to see you again."

"But it isn't even daylight yet. Alicia, poor child, is sleeping——"

"Wake her up. I'll give you just an hour to get out of the house."

"You're a hard, cruel, old man!" Mrs. Leeds cried bitterly, but she hurried up the stairs to obey his command.

After the woman had disappeared, Rosanna picked up her sweater which she had dropped on a chair. She turned toward the door.

"Hold on there," Jacob called. "Where are you going?"

"I was just leaving. You told Mrs. Leeds——"

"Well, you're not Mrs. Leeds, are you?" the

old man snapped. "If you're willing, I want you to stay here."

"You mean—indefinitely?"

"Yes, if you think you could stand to live with me. I'm cross and I like things done my own way, but if you could put up with me——"

"If I could put up with you!" Rosanna ran to him and flung her arms about him. "Why, I think you're a darling! I was afraid to tell you so for fear you'd believe I was after your money."

"Money! Fiddlesticks!" Jacob sniffed. He wiped a tear from his eye. "I'm going to try to make up to you for all that you've missed."

The two had a great deal to say to each other, but presently they remembered Penny. She had been watching the little scene with eager delight.

"I'll never be able to thank you," Rosanna declared happily. "You're responsible for everything, Penny."

"I wish you'd permit me to reward you in a substantial way," Mr. Winters added.

Penny smilingly shook her head. "It was fun

coming here to Raven Ridge. But it would ruin everything if I accepted pay for it."

"At least you'll stay a few days longer," Mr. Winters urged.

"If Father will agree to it."

When Mr. Nichols returned from police headquarters another pleasant surprise was in store for Penny.

"It looks as if you've won the reward which the Bresham Store offered for the capture of Laponi," he told her. "Five hundred dollars."

"Don't turn it down," Rosanna urged.

"I won't," Penny laughed. "In fact, I know just how I'll use that money when I get it."

"How?" her father inquired.

"I'll buy myself a new car."

"I thought perhaps you'd use it to go into business in competition with me," he teased.

"Some day I'll solve a mystery which will be so big and important that you'll not be able to twit me about it," Penny announced.

"I wasn't really teasing, my dear. I think you did a fine bit of work this time and I'm proud of you."

"Honestly?"

"Honestly," Mr. Nichols repeated, smiling broadly. "And I predict that you're only starting on this career of crime detection which you find so very thrilling."

"I wish I could be sure of that," Penny sighed.

With all her heart she longed for another adventure as exciting as the one she had experienced. Although she had no way of knowing what the future held, she was destined soon to have her wish gratified. In the third volume of the Penny Nichols' series, entitled, "The Secret of the Black Imp," she encounters a mystery more baffling than any she has previously solved.

After Mrs. Leeds and her daughter left the house, the others took Mr. Nichols for a tour of the secret passageway. Jacob Winters explained in detail how the panel operated and entertained them by playing several selections on the pipe organ.

"I love music," Rosanna remarked wistfully. "I've never even had an opportunity to learn to play the piano."

"You'll have it now," he assured her.

Mr. Nichols remained during the day but late in the afternoon he was forced to start for home as his work had been neglected. He was very willing, however, that Penny should remain as long as she wished at the old mansion.

The days were all too short for the two girls who enjoyed rambling through the woods, rowing and swimming in the lake, and exploring every nook and cranny of the interesting old house. But at length the time came when Penny too was obliged to depart.

"Come back and see us often, won't you?" Rosanna urged as they parted.

"Whenever I can," Penny promised. "I've had a glorious time."

She drove away, but at the bend in the road halted the car to glance back. The house, cloaked in the shadows of evening, looked nearly as mysterious as upon the occasion of her first visit. However, to her it would never again have a fearful aspect.

Jacob Winters and his niece stood framed in the doorway. They waved.

Penny returned the salute. Then regretfully she turned her back upon Raven Ridge and drove slowly down the mountain road which led home.

M. W.

THE END

PENNY NICHOLS AND THE MYSTERY OF THE LOST KEY

CLARK

GOLDSMITH